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W*orld Of Warcraft* launched in 2004, the same year Facebook officially rolled out. Back then, if you had said that Blizzard's byzantine fantasy RPG would go on to attract 12 million subscribers who'd be responsible for nearly 40 per cent of the revenues of the world's largest videogame publisher in 2010, you would have been patted on the back and asked if you needed a little lie down. Had you also claimed that Mark Zuckerberg's social network would in only a few years become a hugely penetrative and lucrative online gaming platform in its own right, there may have been calls made to specialist care facilities, too. The truth is that network-enabled entertainment has forged an order-defying agenda in what feels like no time at all, exceeding all early expectations and shaking up a slow-moving gaming old guard.

Despite its achievements, Blizzard knows that it cannot stand still. Amid the success of *StarCraft II* and the buzz surrounding *Diablo III*, the studio is preparing to release *World Of Warcraft: Cataclysm*, which, rather than operate on the fantasy MMOG to deliver a nip here and a tuck there, attempts to rebirth it. And it could well be the riskiest production to come out of the studio since its formation in 1991. Blizzard's vast playerbase is a passionate and vocal one that isn't always receptive to change (two words: Real ID). However, it's the sort of community whose true value is so great as to be difficult to estimate, and if it likes what it sees, the rewards will be enormous.

Fortunately, all signs point to Blizzard having applied its unparalleled experience and expertise to make *Cataclysm* the sort of game release that results in heaving waves of workplace absenteeism. On p46 we take a look at the finer points of its work, while the men about to wreak destruction on millions explain their battle plan.



Vogster Entertainment Turns to Autodesk Beast Middleware to Open New Online Game Worlds with *CrimeCraft: BLEEDOUT*.

Image courtesy of Vogster Entertainment.

CrimeCraft: BLEEDOUT, a new game from Vogster Entertainment is bringing a richer and broader experience to the world of massively multi-player online role-playing games (MMORPG), and they're using Autodesk software to help them do it. *CrimeCraft* satisfies both online players looking for more complex battle mechanics and 1st-person shooter players looking for more realistic characters and an online community to play with and against.

"In order to provide a visually striking and realistic game environment and the massive scope of an online game, we needed middleware that would provide consistent high-quality results and easy integration," says Alexandr Chayka, Lead Artist on *CrimeCraft*.

Autodesk® Beast™ middleware helps development teams aesthetically enhance their games with a precomputed global illumination (GI) lighting solution, while avoiding complicated and time-consuming lighting setups and helping minimize run-time costs.

"Autodesk Beast helps us create better lighting with less effort," says Chayka. "In turn, this enables our team to focus on polishing the visuals and getting more done with less. I can no longer imagine working without it."

Read the Complete Story:
autodesk.com/crimecraft_story

Once we saw what we could achieve using Beast, our choice was an easy one.

—Alexandr Chayka
Lead Artist
Vogster Entertainment



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"Have you been playing with dead cats?"



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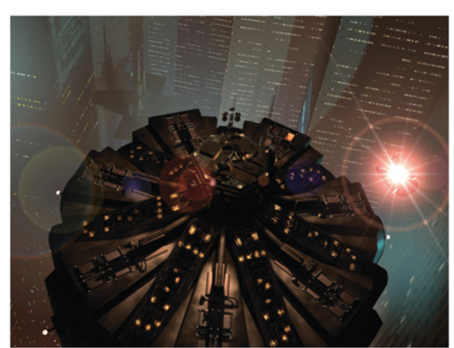
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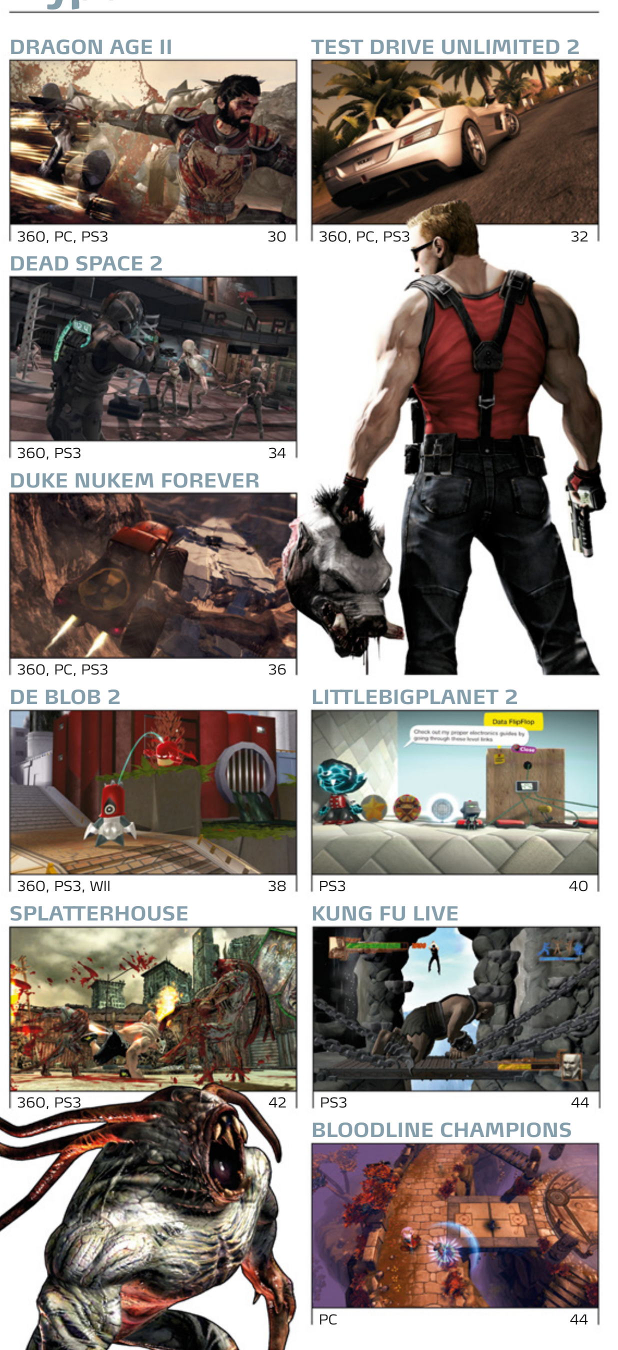


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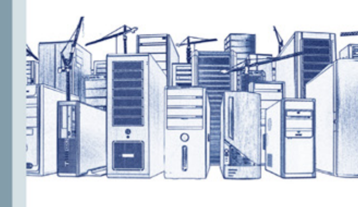
Review





START









HARDWARE

Building a new PC

As consoles begin to show their age, hard questions are being asked about PC gaming. What are its problems, and where does it go next?

The problem with a world as vast and eclectic as PC gaming is that it's easy to pretend that nothing's wrong. Evangelists can point to *Minecraft*, *Torchlight*, *DotA 2*, *Vindictus* and any number of games that remind us where so many ideas still originate. Or *World Of Warcraft*, *Farmville* and *StarCraft II* – the ones that remind us where time and money are still being spent. But what do you say to a diehard FPS nut who remembers when it wasn't just Valve? Or *Baldur's Gate* fans who die a little more with every *Dragon Age 2* reveal? Or the guy who just bought a £350 graphics card?

We're not here to talk about Facebook games or any of the above. The world has more than its share of those, and for some they read like nails being driven gleefully into a coffin. Not the PC market's, of course – not when revenues topped $13 billion last year, up three per cent on the year before, according to DFC Intelligence. But wasn't there a time when, thanks to companies like id Software or some small studio under the auspices of an Activision or EA, the eyes of the world would turn to the PC as it unveiled the technology – the *games* – of the future. Games that justified upgrades.

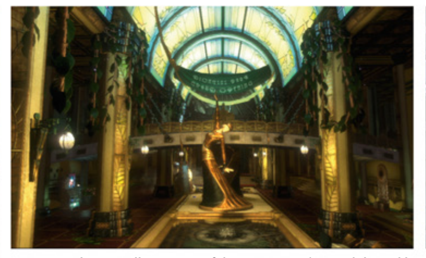
Where, you might ask, are those games now?

"If you're working on blockbuster productions then you have to sell blockbuster numbers," explains Crytek CEO **Cevat Yerli**, "and those are only made nowadays in the living room. As long as PC gaming doesn't have its approval from gamers there, I think it's going to be difficult to push next-gen gaming on it." He's speaking from his own perspective, that of the "production value developer". Games like *Far Cry* and *Crysis*, in other words, that offer rare glimpses of what the PCs of the day could actually do. The rarity isn't lost on him, and he doesn't see it changing any time soon. "This is a commercially driven industry. If you want next-generation technology-driven games, you'll have to wait for next-generation home entertainment devices that can power better graphics and more computation time."



For owners of the latest and greatest PC hardware, this is understandably frustrating. "Naturally, any development that calls itself research is always on PC first and foremost, because it's the most natural platform to develop on, for graphics, physics or maths," says Yerli. "Any kind of next-gen technology will be born on the PC first, that's for sure." You just won't be able to enjoy it, it seems, until consoles can join in the fun.

A very large and important segment of PC gaming is now inextricably linked with console development. A look at October's best-sellers list on Steam shows *Medal Of Honor* (more on that later) in the top spot, *Fallout: New Vegas* at number two, *Left 4 Dead 2* at five, *Borderlands* at six, *Dead*





Some Unreal games allow resourceful PC owners to 'correct' things like console-influenced FOVs and key bindings. *Medal Of Honor* (left) isn't one of them, but *BioShock* (centre) is. Texture trouble in *Mass Effect 2* (right) on PC improves when playing later DLC

Rising 2 at seven, and *Bad Company 2* at nine. Every last one of these games has been criticised for suffering one or more of the symptoms of being a multiplatform production.

"Consoles are naturally, because of their different architecture, a contributing factor, I agree," says Yerli. "But I generally think it's still developers' mentality. A lot nowadays don't consider PC a big issue any more; their expectations are nowhere near what they are for the console versions. Until the PC market creates comparable revenues, companies are not going to spend enough on the PC SKU of the game. Or they're going to work with technologies that enable them to leverage it by the definitions of the engines; if the engine scales itself according to the platform's power, which in the case of CryEngine it does. A little advertisement for you there."

This creates a dilemma, he explains, where publishers have to choose between risking money, chancing bad commentary for trying to save money on their PC version, or just not doing the PC version at all. Few games show the consequences better than *Mafia II*, which managed to rankle PC and console gamers alike. Among other things, the PS3 version thought it could get away with removing most of its grass. It couldn't. The PC version, meanwhile, was dubbed a console port for its low-resolution textures, unpleasant edge anti-aliasing and forced depth of field. So, is the distance between current console coffin-dodgers and cutting-edge PCs simply too great to span?

"As long as the current console generation exists and as long as we keep pushing the PC as well, the more difficult it'll be to really get the benefit of both," says Yerli. "PC is easily a generation ahead right now. With 360 and PS3, we believe the quality of the games beyond *Crysis 2* and other CryEngine developments will be pretty much limited to what their creative expression is, what the content is. You won't be able to squeeze more juice from those rocks."

But technology alone doesn't explain why PC versions of games like *BioShock 2* and *Mass Effect 2* (which admittedly has improved during its DLC run) feature textures barely better than their console counterparts. Nor can you blame Unreal Engine when *Batman: Arkham Asylum*, following heavy investment from PC hardware manufacturers, is an HD marvel in comparison.

"Wearing my producer hat, I can make the obvious guess that it's just the effort involved and the market," suggests **Jaakko Haapasalo**, head of Futuremark Game Studio. "The console market is well understood, it's homogenous, easy to target. The PC market is seen as very fragmented, and there's no real workable digital rights management.

Those are the real drivers behind decisions like these. I would not be surprised if decisions are made from an economic point of view to take the least effort possible on PC. You just might not care about your pipeline or art workflow enough. I can understand that."

And control schemes? Presentation? *Medal Of Honor*, *Borderlands*, *Left 4 Dead 2* and *Fallout: New Vegas* all feature interfaces, FOV choices and controls which have needed mods, patches or apologies for their consolification. "That's an example of where the primary platform you develop for tends to take over, definitely," says Happsalo. "I see no technical reason not to localise controls for PC, or the other way around. There's a very good hardcore control model on PC; I see no particular excuse not to take that into account."

He's joined by colleague **James Gallagher**, Futuremark's head of marketing, who asks: "I just wonder, to use that *Medal Of Honor* example, if they allowed the angry forum crowd to play exactly the way they wanted, and if the PC controls responded in that twitchy, precise way, would a game that was so linearly scripted and deterministic even work at all? There's something in that PC shooter experience that is more about the player telling his story through his actions."

This is what really frightens many PC players nowadays, the osmosis of console design on to a platform it doesn't suit, compounded by the erosion of traditional PC values. Dedicated servers in *Modern Warfare 2*, anyone? "I know the Infinity Ward guys pretty well. I've walked through their offices and there were about 100 cubes, and 90+ were focused on consoles," recalls **Matt Ployhar**, Intel's 'visual computing evangelist', research





Intel's Matt Ployhar (left) believes that an input device should be matched to the game it's being used to play, and that there is no universal solution. Cevat Yerli (right) of Crytek, meanwhile, suggests that *Crysis 2* will push today's consoles to their technical limits

chairman of the PC Gaming Alliance, and author of blog posts bearing titles like 'Hear that knocking sound? It's PC gaming!' and 'Dude! Who killed my 1st Person Shooter?'.

"They've done a great job of bringing that FPS experience to the gamepad, but I'm a purist," he continues. "There's still nothing better than a mouse and keyboard, and if you take away the aiming algorithm for a joypad, it's game over for somebody on console. I love gamepads for games like *Tomb Raider* and *Assassin's Creed*; they're really good for that. So, match the game device to the genre it's good for. I'll never believe *Halo* would have been better on joypad than on mouse and keyboard – it's the best PC game that never shipped. Yeah, they ported it, but I was there at the time and it's just a shadow of the original."

While we are absolutely not going *there*, Ployhar himself has been just about everywhere: Microsoft for 12-and-a-half years, through the Sidewinder peripheral division, the DirectX team and Windows 7 planning; the aforementioned Microsoft Game Studios; and now Intel, where he sits on panels at expos like Penny Arcade and reminds us that PC gaming isn't dead. At the latter, he was treated to the sight of Microsoft's Games For Windows head Kevin Unangst trying to placate PC gamers burned by the closure of *Flight Simulator* studio ACES and *Halo Wars* creator Ensemble, the demise of *Alan Wake* on PC, and the flagging Games For Windows initiative.

Redmond's announcements of *Flight*, *Age Of Empires Online* and the PC *Fable III* have had mixed results. Some believe the company all but sabotaged the PC to drive support for Xbox 360, letting its Games For Windows Live service become a gangrenous limb on some of the PC's biggest games. Others are more sympathetic.

"It's debatable," Happsalo says. "I personally don't see them as being somehow responsible for the PC gaming scene. I've just never seen that. They've had some interesting games, and they've produced most of the platform. I think their work on DirectX is actually pretty good and has been throughout, though you could debate DX10." But then he swaps over to wear his producer hat and isn't quite so generous.

"If you think from that point of view, it's

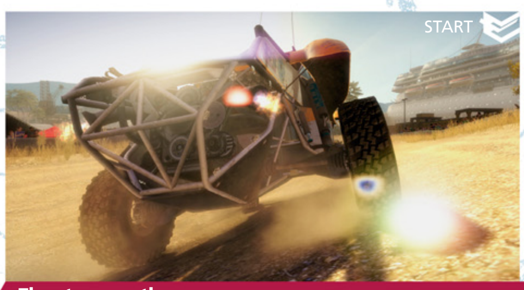




Mafia II **(far right) can be a good-looking game, but it annoyed PC purists with its console-level textures. *Crysis 2* (above), however, achieves greater parity between its PC and console iterations**



Had the RTS achieved a truly gamepad-friendly control scheme, would *StarCraft II* have looked as good as this (below), or more like *Ruse* or the console version of *Command & Conquer 4*?



The story continues

A tale that's too big to cram into just a single issue…

PC gaming is big. Vastly, hugely, mind-bogglingly big. That's why our editorial on the topic continues next issue, looking closely at the tech emerging in the latest PC hardware, and finding out just who plans to use them, despite the lure of DX9 consoles. So, if the idea of Cevat Yerli using phrases like "realtime micro-polygon rendering", "point-based physical simulations" and "voxel raycasting" makes you weak at the knees, you'll need to sit down. Our Futuremark contributors will be back to talk about the true importance of DX11 (see *Dirt 3*, above), and we'll be asking Nvidia whether PhysX is more than just a marketing ploy.

about longer-term return on your investment; the investment you do on your gaming technology or engines. I do think Microsoft has a role in setting expectations for the coming five-year period, so that when a game developer on a PC platform makes an investment in a new API and starts planning new content, they know that when they actually ship for PC, the platform is there and the ecosystem is in an anticipated state. So, setting clear-cut future guidelines and directions… sure, Microsoft could do more."

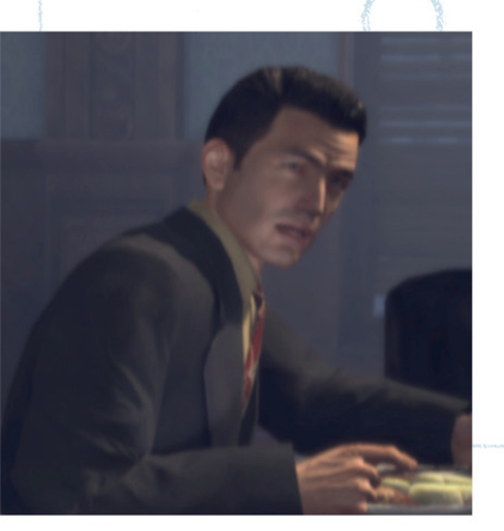
"Rapid evolution of the graphics API and Windows overall brings a level of uncertainty," adds colleague **Ilkka Koho**, senior manager of Futuremark's PC products.

"Their actions speak louder than words, right?" says Ployhar. "Could they have done a lot more? Yeah, they could have brought Kinect to Windows. Microsoft could have used Kinect to move through your menus in, say, eHome [its whole-home entertainment strategy, incorporating Windows Media Center] and it could have been done very well. They just chose to bring it to 360 to breathe new life into their console, their walled garden."

"Microsoft's eHome could add games tomorrow: you could download a Windows configurator. They just choose not to because they want to sell you an Xbox"

It went to 360, you'll recall, under the direction of MGS manager **Kudo Tsunoda** who, with his boasts about consoles stealing the PC FPS – "*Halo* did an awesome job, and now hardly anyone plays firstperson shooters on PC any more" – not only made a PR gaffe, but fuelled accusations that, when it comes to the hard-to-handle PC market, Redmond's left hand doesn't know what its right hand is doing.

"Microsoft try to come out with a unified message, but it's really a company where there's this umbrella, and they're not always aligned, even internally, on what the best thing is to do," says Ployhar. "So eHome ends up going from Windows over into IEB, which is their Interactive Entertainment Business Group under Robbie Bach, and there wasn't really anything innovative that happened there. Windows in the living room is what it really comes down to, which is why I like to say that PC thrives despite itself."



It's a topic of fierce debate within the PC community, this desire to make the PC a part of the living room. Some believe it could be a vital turning point that wrestles back some authority, a direct assault on consoles that in many ways act like PCs already. "This is the biggest hurdle for the PC to overcome," 2K Czech producer **Denby Grave** said to website PC Games Hardware. "How can it get itself on that shelf next to the console?" Other gaming professionals seem nonplussed by the idea. "Go for that for something like a set-top box," says Haapasalo, "but if I want that kind of experience, I'd just get a console. You need a chair, a keyboard and a mouse." But not everyone agrees. "You're such a traditionalist," laughs Gallagher.

Ployhar, meanwhile, believes the breakthrough will happen eventually, and that the catalyst could be WiDi, the wireless HDMI technology announced by Intel in January. The subject of massive interest among PC and TV hardware manufacturers, WiDi is part of a scenario question that Ployhar thinks is not being asked. "It's a console-like experience where you're not tethered to your TV in your living room. No other platform in the world can do that. How come the OEMs aren't talking about this any more? How come you don't see PC Gamer magazine talking about that flexibility?"

Surely, though, if you were to click a button and magically beam your PC output to your TV today, you'd still be pretty far from a console-like experience. Neither Microsoft nor Steam has shown any real interest in a living-room game UI, even though it's entirely feasible. In the end, believes Ployhar, the choice might be made for them.

"At CES in January, you walked into the Samsung booth and they're doing this whole internet TV thing. People are now thinking about smart TVs. They're making their own UIs with or without Microsoft, and if I can get a Gaikai or such a thing and it's just there… Steam could address that as well, but I think the forcing function's going to be some of these other companies doing it themselves. Microsoft's eHome could add games tomorrow: you could download a Windows configurator or whatever, make a games menu and pull down all the JPEG files for all the games you have preinstalled. They just choose not to because they want to sell you an Xbox."

Would any of this solve the PC's multiformat design dichotomy, or would it just as easily make it worse? One thing's looking more certain – that there will be another console generation, just as soon as Kinect and Move have done their business. And if engine makers like Epic want to repeat their success in this generation, they need to start now on the only platform qualified, and doubtless already have. "It's difficult to tell you what's coming without breaching NDAs," says Yerli, "but there are next-gen developments. Whoever does it next will be the winner. The one that comes with a clearer vision will take the lead again." "You just can't do that work in a vacuum," says Gallagher. "The best way to build those engines and test that technology is by making PC games."



INTERVIEW

Resurrecting a legend

Former magician Randy Pitchford reveals his greatest trick yet: making a Duke Nukem Forever game out of vapourware

Randy Pitchford, president of Gearbox Software, stands below a projection screen and tells us that gaming's own Loch Ness Monster does exist. In fact, *Duke Nukem Forever*, the six-time winner of Wired's Vaporware Award and a winner of its Lifetime Vaporware Achievement, is playable in the adjoining room.

"Can you believe this?" he says. "Me neither. How is this possible?"

It's a good question: how did Gearbox manage to finish the unfinishable game? The truth is, as Pitchford explains, he was in the right place at the right time. He has always had a close connection with *Duke* – his first job in the industry was at 3D Realms, building four of the levels for *Duke 3D* (It's Impossible, Area 51 and The Birth are solely his; he completed work on Pigsty when its originator, Richard 'The Levelord' Gray, left to form Ritual Entertainment). When Pitchford departed 3D Realms in 1997, he says work on *Forever* had already begun, and it was a project he followed intently, not least because Gearbox was able to pluck weary workers from the ranks of 3D Realms as the years progressed.

Then comes the part of the story everyone knows: the long, long wait. *Daikatana* passed by. *Prey* came and went. Gearbox itself shipped 15 titles during the time *Forever* sat in development, apparently burning up between 20 and 30 million dollars of 3DR head George Broussard's own money, by Pitchford's estimation. Then 3D Realms closed its doors amid a legal kerfuffle with publisher Take-Two over the failure to deliver the game as promised. Banking on his goodwill with Take-Two subsidiary 2K, for which Gearbox had just completed the successful *Borderlands*, Pitchford stepped in. With the go-ahead from 3D Realms' top brass, he bought the franchise and then mediated with 2K to dismantle the lawsuits. Finally, he brought on board the eight ex-3D Realms employees who had continued to work on the game in secret, incorporating them as a semi-autonomous team called Triptych Games.

"The last 3D Realms mob was a great team with a great vision, and they made a great game – they just didn't ship it," says Pitchford. "Their vision was really ambitious; it was incomplete and there were things that couldn't be done. They had yet to learn what it takes to go through the shipping process, so I think the idea of bringing it to 360 and PS3 was a distant hope for them. What we were able to bring was an understanding of how games are made in today's world and Gearbox's manpower and talent to ensure it could reach all gamers, solid, bug-free and polished."

"Action heroes have become a lot more human, a lot more complex, a lot more emo. Because of that pussification, Duke really stands out. He's almost fresh again!"

Making it relevant to today is another thing. But there's still huge interest there: within two hours of its unannounced debut at the Penny Arcade Expo, *Duke Nukem Forever* had become the number one trending topic on Twitter worldwide. As the VP of marketing at Gearbox, **Steve Gibson**, points out, many schoolboys who were titillated by *Duke Nukem 3D*'s transgressive swearing, nudity and violence have grown up in lock-step with the median age of gamers.

"I played a game of poker last year," says Pitchford, "and one of the guys at the table decided to ask everyone what they did for a



'Buckeye' is *Forever*'s internal codename. "All of our projects have tree codenames," explains Pitchford (pictured left, alongside Gibson). "*Borderlands* was Willow. *Brothers In Arms* was a Sumac. Now we have projects like Cedar, Birch and Pecan." So now you know



There's plenty more to announce about *Duke*. "A little later we'll bring out multiplayer," says Gibson. "After you've got over the shock." These screenshots track the game's development, from 2001 (above), to 2008 (centre), to modern-day (main)

living. I said, 'I make software,' because I didn't want to engage with it – but Steve Gibson said, 'We make videogames!' And everybody pricked up. Then he pointed at me and said, 'He worked on *Duke Nukem 3D*!' And this guy stood up and leaned across the table to shake my hand. He said: 'The first tits I ever saw!'"

Will it take more than tits and toilet humour to make a modern *Duke*?

"The sense of humour in the world has evolved a little bit, sure," says Gibson. "My take on humour – as an expert on humour – is that sarcasm has come on a lot more. But throwing poop is funny no matter how old you are."

We wonder if the new *Duke* needs to be more ironic than before – the game is certainly self-aware, and was rehashed two-and-a-half years ago to incorporate the ongoing development woes into the actual story.

"I thought he was ironic back in *Duke 3D*," says Pitchford. "He's a one-dimensional amalgamation of all the action heroes. I tell you what is ironic, though – at the beginning he was like an exaggeration of the action-hero cliché. Today, action heroes have become a lot more human, a lot more complex, a lot more emo. Because of that pussification of our heroes, *Duke* really stands out. He's almost *fresh* again!"

Gearbox is perhaps more self-deprecating in aiming for puerile humour than its 3D Realms forebears. As Gibson says with a raised eyebrow: "We're really setting the bar here." Was it difficult for Gearbox, the studio behind the decidedly knob-joke-free *Brother In Arms* series, to adapt?

"We can all degenerate to 13-year-old humour very quickly if we allow ourselves to," says Pitchford with a smile. Gibson is more contemplative: "I think you could have said that a few years ago. But there was a turning point at the studio, perhaps sadly in some ways. There was an epiphany that people just want to have fun. Games were going down the path of seriousness; characters with all this emotional complexity and baggage. But the reality is people have a lot of fun just blowing stuff up and seeing some titties."

What about the action, then? Surely *Duke 3D*'s mechanics won't cut it in the competitive FPS field of the present day.

"*Duke* was one of the first games that had action scenes broken up with puzzles," Gibson reminds us. "Those stop-and-think situations where you weren't using your gun so much have since become a big deal. But we look at the industry as a whole, and what's matured. Consistency of experience and pace have evolved a lot, and we embrace that. The game doesn't feel like a new graphics version of that same style."

Pitchford's professed dipstick for success is much simpler: "At the end of the day, when we consume entertainment we ask: are we having a good time? Do we want to keep going? If the answer's yes, you win."

You suspect, like any magic trick, there's much more going on than Pitchford lets on.





JUST CAN'T STOP GLOVING YOU

"As if you needed any more reasons to pre-order *Michael Jackson: The Experience* – here's one more that will blow you away!" The official website's words, not ours, but if you're a budding impersonator the special-edition glove on offer with Ubisoft's forthcoming dance game might be just just what you need. The glove, complete with rhinestone studs, will be available at select retailers, promising to further enhance "the magic felt by the King of Pop's fans as they dance to his greatest hits". It's an unusual ode to a deceased icon, but the chance to cover up years of gaming thumb is a welcome one.

snurl.com/offthewall





From top: Anfossi, Dugas and Jacques-Belletete. "We're not rookies," says Jacques-Belletete. "Jean-Francois and myself were at Ubisoft in a comfortable situation. I was in charge of the art on *Avatar*; Jean-Francois was creative director on the next *Rainbow Six*. We left because we wanted to work on *Deus Ex*"

INTERVIEW

Cyberpunk's not dead

We talk transhumanism and development tribulations with the Deus Ex team leaders at Eidos Montreal

Deus Ex: Human Revolution looks back to the series' roots, both in terms of its development philosophy and, more literally, by setting it a quarter of a century before the events of the first game begin. We grab producer **David Anfossi**, game director **Jean-Francois Dugas** and art director **Jonathan Jacques-Belletete** for a chat about Eidos Montreal's ambitious prequel to the genre-blending post-millennial-paranoia masterpiece.

"Robotic tech may not be as advanced as it is in a lot of cyberpunk, but in other respects, its themes are looking old today. That's why we went for the Renaissance touch"

What's been the biggest single challenge you've faced during development so far?

David Anfossi: It was the time I saw these two guys trying to build their desk when we got our temporary offices. We chose to have those desks you build yourself so you can connect them to form some sort of common working space. Two hours after the desks were assembled, they realised they had some of the parts upside down.

Jean-Francois Dugas: Yeah, we wondered why the desks weren't comfortable.

DA: I was looking at them going: "Four years! I only have four years to make the game with these guys!" But seriously, the hardest work we did during the first two years was to complete a vertical slice, when you take a small sliver of the game and push it to the level of quality that would be representative of the final version. That was a kind of marathon, to be honest.

JFD: It worked in the end because we were motivated. Too often in the course of making a slice, people give up on elements that don't come together on the first go. But we kept trying different approaches to achieve what we wanted, rather than scrapping the initial vision. We just needed to find the ways to get there. We were also very well supported by the management.

Jonathan Jacques-Belletete: Yeah, we managed to achieve things we certainly could not have done at Ubisoft.

DA: We're very transparent in what we say and do in our studio. We wanted to get back to a workplace where you'd like coming into work every day.

JFD: I don't expect this game to be perfect, but you will feel a soul in it.

Presumably there'll be sequels to this prequel. Does that mean that at some point you're going to end up remaking the first game?

JFD: It's natural to come to the idea of a remake, but our game takes place in 2027 – that's like 25 years before the first game. So it leaves us enough room to build a new series.

JBB: If you look at the history depicted in the franchise, you realise there are many great moments that have yet to be exploited. Reading *Deus Ex*'s in-game writing, you find a huge amount of background. When you get into the 2030s, you could make many games exploiting all the events happening in that period. You have the secession of states, a huge earthquake, a massive

"I'm concerned how games today make you go from point A to point B without thinking too much on the way," says Dugas. "The point at which the *Deus Ex* experience really starts is when you start to look around, analyse your environment, look at your inventory and objects, and think about what you could combine. You may die on your first try but then you have to think and imagine a different approach"

In its squad AI, *Human Revolution* seems to be taking inspiration from *Halo*. "We're interested in the cohesion you can find inside a group," says Dugas, "especially the impact of a leader or officer – and what happens if you lose him. The rest of the men won't run around in panic, but they'll lose the capacity to coordinate"

financial crash, Mexico regaining control over the southern states of the US. There's so much material to exploit. This doesn't mean we *are* going to use these elements, but I just want to point out that there's no problem building a new series inside the franchise without touching those two existing games.

You chose to revisit the fiction's past, with its rudimentary tech. Did you feel the series had already taken future tech as far as it could go?
JFD: The choice was motivated by several things. But we noticed that the 2020s saw an explosion of human enhancement through mechanical or nanotech means, and we found it interesting to draw a contrast between people who could afford nanotech enhancements – that are invisible – compared to mechanical ones, that were very visible. The theme of transhumanism was very appealing indeed.
JBB: The tech was already too advanced in the first *Deus Ex*. Of course, people would obviously go for an enhancement that wouldn't affect their appearance as human beings. But as a gaming experience, we thought a human with mechanical parts would have a more powerful aesthetic impact. So an early period was a better choice; as art director, this gave me a lot more possibilities.
JFD: Making the enhancement visual with mechanical means allows us to keep the game's core theme of human enhancements very present throughout the experience. It also gives a sense of tragedy as people are losing their humanity. We've integrated the things you see in current wars with generations of veterans coming back home with prosthetic limbs. These aren't enhancements as such, but visually our game echoes those images.

Why do you think cyberpunk settings have fallen out of favour in gaming?
DA: It's not only videogames – there's not so much interest in the theme in movies or anything else any more.
JBB: William Gibson has released his third book, but even in his writing you don't find as much cyberpunk as you used to. You could say that *Metal Gear Solid* is one of the few cyberpunk games to be made lately – and even that's a real stretch. I think many things that were prophesied in the cyberpunk fiction of the '80s have materialised today. OK, so we might not be close to Blade Runner – there are no flying cars – but in the way that the new replaces the old and the cosmopolitan society are here today. The web and the network of Ghost In The Shell are here. At the end of the '80s, Mamoru Oshii predicted the prime importance of the network in our society and it is so. Robotic tech may not be as advanced as it is in a lot of cyberpunk, but in other respects, its themes are looking old today. That's why we went for the Renaissance touch to give the game a new style; we could reproduce Blade Runner easily with today's HD platforms, but it would feel like déjà vu by now.



WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

Trawling eBay for gaming relics is made easy by GameSniped's regularly updated blogroll of what's hot and what's weird in the world of online auctions. The site keeps its eye on all things game-related, from accessories and promotional materials to rare games and consoles. A scan through the archives reveals curiosities like an actual *1080°* snowboard, a *Zelda* rupee made real and a number of prototype controllers and debug units that probably shouldn't be on sale. It's as much a history lesson in marketing gone wrong as an emporium of hard-to-find gaming artefacts, and well worth a browse.

Site: GameSniped
URL: www.gamesniped.com

SOUND BYTES

"I think one of the biggest problems right now is the actions and attitude of some of the gamers out there. You know who they are. If they spent less time spewing ignorant hate on the boards and in online games, and more time rallying behind the great games they love and helping to build a thriving community that welcomes everyone that shows up to play with them, everybody wins."
Trey Smith, creative director on *NBA Jam*, identifies a possible threat from within the gaming community

"No, it's the ordinary people who keep handing over their money for overproduced, soulless shit that doesn't need to exist, either because they don't know any better or, worse, even though they do."
Fraser Allison of Australian gaming website RedKingsDream proposes another theory

"One of the studies, the Anderson study, says that the effect of violence is the same for a Bugs Bunny episode as it is for a violent video. So can the legislature now, because it has that study, say we can outlaw Bugs Bunny?"
In a transcription of the oral hearings for Schwarzenegger Vs EMA at the US Supreme Court, **Justice Sotomayor** ponders a future which curtails the adventures of Elmer Fudd

"We do not have a tradition in this country of telling children they should watch people actively hitting schoolgirls over the head with a shovel so they'll beg with mercy, being merciless and decapitating them, shooting people in the leg so they fall down."
Chief Justice Roberts counters the EMA's attorney, Paul Smith, on the history of screen violence in the US

"why do they call the lich king's mount invincible you can totally see it?"
YouTube commenter **Ryanpbny** queries a little bit of *World Of Warcraft* lore

"@Ryanpbny its not Invisible, but Invincible u failure"
Fellow YouTuber **pks9067** sets things straight in the appropriate style



INTERVIEW



Newton Dunn suggests that the initial fun of playing *Create* is to simply mess about and discover how things work best, rather than setting yourself hard and fast objectives

Creating Create

How EA's kids' imprint Bright Light Studio put together a playground that lets its users make up their own rules

EA's *Create* aims to set children loose in a physics playground with a suite of tools that will ultimately allow them to build their own puzzles and challenges. Sound familiar? We catch up with designer **Emily Newton Dunn** (above) to find out how the game has been built as something more than *My First LittleBigPlanet*.

The similarities to *LittleBigPlanet* are obvious, but how do you perceive *Create*?
For us, *Create* started off as a visual art package. We wanted to make a way of creating great-looking graphics that was easy and accessible for people. We achieved that relatively quickly, and then we thought, 'Well, this all looks really great, but there's no gameplay on top of it'. We asked ourselves what we'd want to do in this world, and that's where the physics-based challenges and puzzles came from.

"I think we're really different in the way that we allow you to just noodle with things. A lot of our content is just about messing around with stuff and going completely bonkers"

The game seems to prioritise immediacy over intricacy somewhat – is that a reaction to the fiddliness of *LBP*?
I think we're really different in the way that we allow you to just noodle with things. A lot of our content is just about messing around with stuff and going completely bonkers. In a lot of our challenges, you're just chucking things around, stuff's bouncing about, and you've got the score going up. It's a very different premise, in a way. It's not a platform game or a platform for games.

Do you think it's dangerous to give players too much freedom straight away?
That's interesting. We just wanted to make something that was a bit of a chain reaction. We wanted instantly visual feedback where you can see one thing bouncing to the next. It's in a very limited space for the most part. It's about using your creativity within limits. That's why we have a limited palette, and we introduce each of the items bit by bit, then give you clear objectives all the way. On top of that is where we let players go wild.

How much of the design in creativity games comes down to nailing the interface?
I think a GUI on any game is always problematic. It's also one of those things that often only gets thought about at the last minute. It was even more important to us than usual, so we thought about it really early on. It's one of those things that evolves as the game goes on, and we certainly iterated on it a lot. It's interesting, though, because interfaces are one of the hardest things about making games, and one of the things that people making games care about the least, it seems. They're definitely one of the most difficult things to get right. As for us, I think we're relatively solid when it comes to the GUI. There's always things you'd change even now, little things you'd like to tweak.

How do you balance a game where the challenges are so open-ended?
We have these score-centric levels called Scoretacular rounds, and the thing you notice about those is that you can really see the difference between people who have played the game and unlocked everything, and people who are just picking it up. These levels are still about getting an object from A to B, but there's a lot of scope. If you're new to everything, you'll just get a rocket to shove the car across the finish line. Once you've got a larger arsenal and more understanding of how things fit together, you really start getting the crazy solutions. All we have to do is make sure the game supports both approaches.



Newswire

Shenmue returns

Sensationalist headline aside, it's exciting to discover that Yu Suzuki's studio Ys Net is hard at work on *Shenmue City*, a PC and social mobile game due to launch in Japan this winter.

Set in Yokosuka, the same location as the original *Shenmue*, the game is story-driven, with as-yet-undisclosed social and item-based aspects (including gashapon collectibles, perhaps?). *Shenmue City* will debut on the Yahoo Mobage PC gaming portal in Japan, though launch dates for other territories have not yet been announced.

How has having a broader audience in mind shaped the way the game's been built?

For us, Bright Light is a studio that traditionally makes games for kids, so we focus on accessibility, and we focus on ease of use. We want anybody to be able to pick up our games and get into them immediately. One of our goals with *Create* was that we wanted people to be able to tinker with it and enjoy themselves very quickly. We just wanted to make something that was fun to use and cool for kids. We also wanted people to be able to share things, but not necessarily only over the internet. It's about how people play the game together in a room, squabbling, bouncing ideas around. It's not a twoplayer game, but it's still something you can share and muck around with together.

Are you always going to have the problem that people are intimidated by games that require creativity?

I think as long as you're aware of that, you can work around it. *Create* is really a point-and-click experience – you move the cursor and, ding-ding-ding, things start building. We call these things no-fail tools: whatever you do, you get some kind of reaction from it, and that gives players a really gentle curve into creativity.





Weerasuriya says that "*Chains Of Olympus* was a learning experience," but the process was clearly a beneficial one, because the sequel (pictured) is a barnstorming actioner

INTERVIEW

Morning glory

Ready At Dawn's co-founder on the Olympian task of PSP development

The action genre has had a rocky time of it on PSP. Few firstperson shooters have taken off, and even a flagship franchise such as *Killzone* opted for isometric presentation. Ready At Dawn's PSP efforts, meanwhile, have proved the platform's capabilities, establishing the handheld as a happy home for thirdperson battling. With *Ghost Of Sparta*, the studio's second portable instalment in the *God Of War* series, hitting shelves, we sit down with disarmingly candid co-founder **Ru Weerasuriya** to talk about the device's limitations and future iterations.

"To tell the truth," says Weerasuriya, "during our first conversations with Sony I think even they were saying: 'I don't know if PSP's capable of doing a *GOW* game. How about we do a side-scroller?' And I was like: 'Really? You can't just translate it and make it a side-scroller!' We almost had to convince them that we needed to make it a true *GOW* game!"

The proof is in the pudding – with over two-and-a-half million sales worldwide. But despite the company's reputation as a go-to PSP developer (or perhaps because of it), Weerasuriya is frank about

"There's so many things that publishers and the manufacturer and Sony dropped the ball on – it's natural, it's the first one. The hope you can have is that they learn from that experience"

the platform's shortcomings. "It was the first portable that Sony released – it's a trial by fire," he says, mollifying a fearful-looking PR. "It's a good platform and you can make amazing things on it. I think that we've tried as much as possible to prove that in the last seven years. But it was doomed from the beginning, that's its biggest problem. It was doomed from the very get-go. There are some things which aren't conducive to calling it a true portable gaming platform and calling it a connective platform, although it has Wi-Fi. There's so many things that publishers and the manufacturer and Sony dropped the ball on – it's natural, it's the first one. The hope that you can have is that they learn from that experience when they make the next one, and that they solve the issues with the PSP and the PSP Go – and also that they learn from what the others are doing, because there's plenty of other manufacturers that have done pretty amazing things when it comes to mobile gaming."

Mobile gaming has a lot to teach home console developers too, says Weerasuriya. "I would love to get to the point where we could maybe make smaller games – two or three hours, core experiences – just like a movie. I think that I would want to see that as a future for games overall, regardless of the platform. You pick up the game, and then three hours later you're done. Maybe they're cheaper – $9.99 or $19.99 – but smaller experiences where you feel satisfied, where you feel like you've got your entertainment out of it. I would rather do that than keep doing these big games. Hopefully that's also the way other people will start thinking, because personally I'm tired – I don't even have the time to play these games for 16 hours. I'm pretty fervent in thinking that's the way it should go. Not everybody believes that, but I really think that we need to make great, concentrated experiences."

Ready At Dawn has certainly earned Sony's ear – and with the company's PSP Go pointing to a download-only future, perhaps it's now more than ready to listen.



Ru Weerasuriya joined Ready At Dawn from Blizzard, where he worked on the *Warcraft* RTS titles, *WOW* and *StarCraft: Brood War*

Continue

GoldenEye splitscreen
Hats off to the secondary fire mode of the year

Bizarre game swag
Gherkins all round. Bring on the pickled walnuts

Kinect dance-offs
Arguments will never be the same

Quit

Kinect dance-offs
Our poor backs will never be the same

The virtual Judi Dench
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Kinect can make even big old rooms feel a bit poky


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gran-turismo.com
PS3
PlayStation 3
SONY
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INCOMING

The Third Birthday

FORMAT: **PSP** PUBLISHER: **SQUARE ENIX**



Shifting both from home console to portable and from RPG to shooter, the third in the *Parasite Eve* series (if you don't count the novel that started it) gets an early 2011 western release

Gran Turismo 5

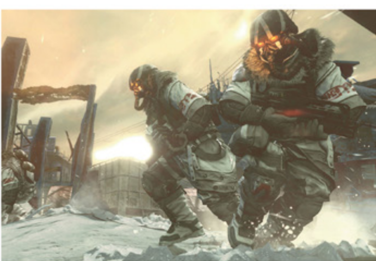
FORMAT: **PS3** PUBLISHER: **SCEE**



It was so close we could smell the T-Cut, and now, thanks to a publisher dictum, the release date has again vanished in a puff of attentively simulated brake dust. Expect it before 2011, says Sony

Killzone 3

FORMAT: **PS3** PUBLISHER: **SCEE**



Are fans still interested in special editions that don't come with military-grade SUVs? Guerrilla's will come with a gift voucher, map-pack key and a pair of natty space-fascist goggles

Professor Layton Vs Ace Attorney

FORMAT: **3DS** PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM, LEVEL-5**



Layton and Wright lock heads over a case of witchcraft in a fingerpointing puzzler penned by *Ace Attorney*'s chief writer-director Shu Takumi. No confirmed Euro release? *Objection!*

Rock Of Ages

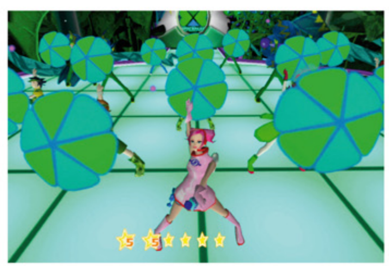
FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3** PUBLISHER: **ATLUS**



From the developer of cuckoo firstperson fist-fighting fantasy *Zeno Clash*, the Monty Python-inflected boulder-rolling tower defence title is confirmed for digital download in the spring

Space Channel 5: Part 2

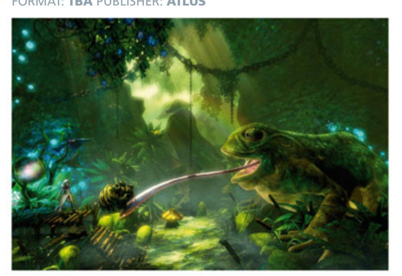
FORMAT: **360, PS3** PUBLISHER: **SEGA**



Sega's Dreamcast gem is due a download HD re-release early next year, alongside *Sega Bass Fishing*. How many times do we have to buy it to ensure a *Jet Set Radio Future* sequel?

Trine 2

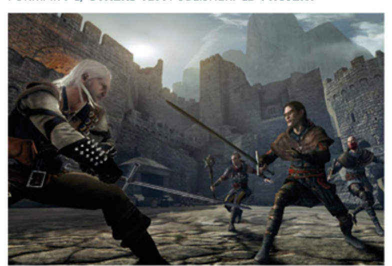
FORMAT: **TBA** PUBLISHER: **ATLUS**



Having unbound their souls at the end of the first game, what calamity will force a second binding in the sequel? More pretty physics conundrums will test warrior, wizard and thief this spring

The Witcher 2: Assassins Of Kings

FORMAT: **PC, OTHERS TBA** PUBLISHER: **CD PROJEKT**



Big on choice and consequences, you say? We wonder what kind of karma hit CD Projekt will take for downgrading the console versions to merely "potential" for the second game in a row

Yakuza: Of The End

FORMAT: **PS3** PUBLISHER: **ATLUS**



Nothing punctuates a franchise's dignity like a zombie apocalypse. Will Ryu's undead nemeses prove a fantasy too far for the sprawling mobster sim? At least they're not Nazis



INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

Siamese Enemies

bit.ly/bxXMUZ

Imagine the subject of motherly love approached via the delicate sensibilities of *Fruit Mystery* (bit.ly/apNiBR) in a competitive multiplayer context. Such is Swedish maniac Krimelo's latest effort, in which crude visuals are mashed with lurid, convulsing kaleidoscopes and accompanied by a soundtrack that sounds like an Amon Tobin track recreated with a trash compactor and an agitated monkey.

Siamese twins, spurned by their ungrateful mother, are sent on a trip to the hospital. The journey there requires the conjoined players to cooperate but also to compete – fighting over the collectable organs they find along the way. Upon arrival, the two players operate – cutting open their bodies, snatching organs from each other and hurriedly sewing them into place. The twins then race back across the level – the first one to arrive wins their parent's affection – but the trick is that each successfully attached organ or limb commutes advantages, while finishing the operation quickly gives you a head start. It's demented in the purest, most beautiful way.


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Music games shift focus

Piers Harding-Rolls discusses the recent sales trends in music games, and asks where next for this most idiosyncratic genre

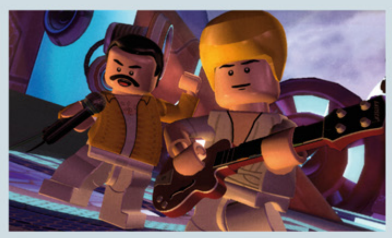
Let's roll time back to late 2007 during the launch of *Guitar Hero 3*, and relive the unbridled enthusiasm of the consumer media that covered the music game genre. The blanket coverage engulfed the specialist press and made significant inroads into the mainstream journals, through stories in broadsheets, tabloids, radio and TV. The coverage helped awareness of both *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band*, prompting mainstream consumers to get involved in music games, which in turn resulted in multimillion-unit sellers for both brands. Back then if I had suggested that, just three years on, both the latest instalments from *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band* – the biggest brands in the rock-led sector – would be selling in the low thousands at launch, compared to the multimillions of *Guitar Hero 3* and *Rock Band*'s debut offering, the industry and press would have dismissed my comments as crazy talk. The fact is I didn't, nor did others, because the decline in consumer demand for these brands has been fairly rapid, dramatic, and just a little surprising.

It was always going to be a challenge for music games to go up against both Move and Kinect and compete for the same spend as these new technologies

So what's been going on? Well, I believe there are a number of factors that have combined to undermine the sales of the latest games. Some of these are related to the products themselves, while others are external details, which the publishers in question have had little control over. First up, the massive success that *GH3* and *RB* enjoyed was followed by a huge amount of new content released into the market, through band-specific sequels and song packs for download. On top of the huge amount that was spent on the games, tens of millions of tracks have been paid for and downloaded to extend the experience for gamers. This aggressive release schedule for both *GH* and *RB* has undermined the freshness of the experience and overexposed gamers to the brands. Gamers now have access to a massive catalogue of thousands of songs covering many of the biggest hits from the last 40 years of music. Do gamers really need more content to play with? (And more obscure content at that, now that the most well-known tracks have already been released as downloadable content.)

In addition to this content, the update cycle for peripherals has also been aggressive. Once gamers have invested in a set of peripherals, they need a massive pull to reinvest all over again. Consumer reticence to upgrade these tools has hugely deflated the music genre opportunity, as bundled kits meant very high average sales prices of between £70 to £120, which are now very difficult to match. It appears that consumers will only reinvest at launch prices if they are convinced that sequels and their new peripherals offer something markedly different than what has gone before – initial sales suggests that many past *GH* and *RB* gamers have yet to be convinced this is the case with the latest games.





The release of a large number of themed sequels – such as *Rock Band*'s Green Day, The Beatles and Lego editions, plus *Guitar Hero*'s Metallica, Aerosmith and Van Halen variants – has raised issues concerning the speed at which the music genre has become saturated





Could *Rock Band 3*, with its new hardware (top), be the title that reverses the series' sales decline? Harmonix must be hoping so



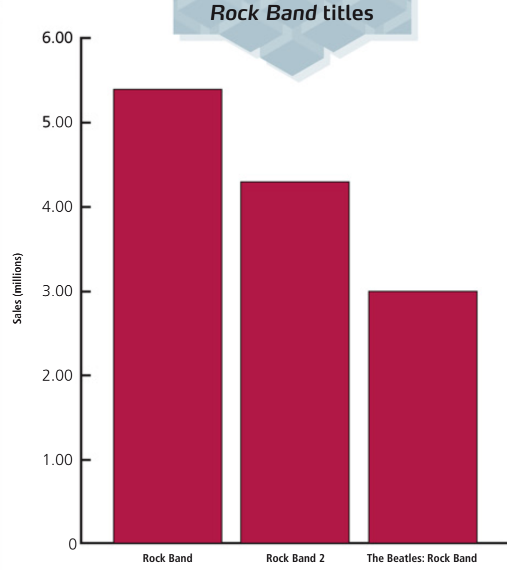


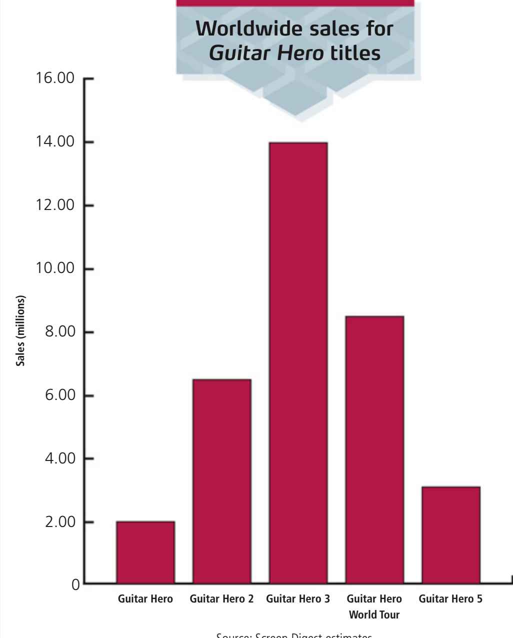
Some consumers are likely to be delaying purchase of these games until they are more affordable, which will probably result in a long tail of sales, but at significantly reduced selling prices. Initial buzz will not have been helped by the lack of marketing spend on the most recent releases. While both titles offer new experiences that are different to previous games, it may be that many consumers are unaware or unconvinced that these games really are that distinct.

The changes that have taken place with regard to gameplay and content represent an attempt to connect with the enthusiast user of these games, but with the result of making each experience ever more niche. *RB* experts will love the Pro mode experiences in *RB3*, but are still a relatively small group of consumers – certainly unlikely to be the four million or more of the earlier two versions. Likewise, loyal *GH* fans will love the content of *Warriors Of Rock*, but again are a much more niche audience compared to the mainstream punters of *GH3*, which went on to sell over ten million. During the phase of reorientation of these two incumbent music game brands, other forms of music game have emerged with significant ferocity. The popularity of *Just Dance* reflects a cheaper and more mainstream music experience. The sector will be reinforced by the release of more dance games this Christmas, not least *Dance Central* from *RB*'s creator, Harmonix. It would seem that a portion of the mainstream music gamers has refocused its energy on a different type of music game.

It's worth noting that the competitive environment for expensive music gaming peripherals is at a high point at the end of 2010. It was always going to be a challenge for music games to go up against both Move and Kinect and compete for the same spend as these new technologies. I don't believe the music genre is at a dead end, and expect dance titles to sell well this Christmas. But, based on latest performance, these incumbent brands face a significant challenge to reinvent themselves and attract a wider audience back to these titles. Leveraging popular content and lowering the barrier to consumer entry dictated by the cost of peripherals would be a good starting point.

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Source: Screen Digest estimates

SOMETHING ABOUT Japan

Beige is boring

Christophe Kagotani remembers when computers were exciting



I'm standing in a big electronics retailer, looking for a new laptop. It's clear that a Crusoe is not the best processor in town these days. Actually, it never was. But it served its purpose. Anyway, I'm looking around and… why are all these computers so ugly?

If I had to choose purely for looks, it's a choice of a Sony Vaio or a Mac. I was fortunate enough to have a three-year guarantee extension on my Vaio; it broke down a week after the official one-year guarantee ran out. Its wireless started to act strangely after a few months but it was the hard drive that decided to die. They were both replaced for free. But I never anticipated the motherboard would one day die, too. A Mac, then? Well, it doesn't answer all of my professional needs – like being able to rename a bunch of files.

But, damn, all these other computers are so ugly! And then there's the noise, the heat…

I remember when I used to visit Japan, before I lived here. I would buy magazines about manga, games, computers. Back home I would read them over and over again, dreaming about the things that would never make it to Europe. Fujitsu, NEC, Sharp – they were all making incredible computers with their own OS and great design: the FM Towns with the CD-ROM drive mount on the façade; the double tower X68000; the PC Engine-integrated X1-Twin; Sega's Teradrive. These were exciting times. But the Windows 95 revolution brought standardisation and the loss of brand identity. Today it's inevitably all about cost. But, Windows 95 or not, this would probably have happened anyway.

So now I'm walking around, trying to find something not too ugly and not too poorly manufactured. Looking, hoping.

The videogame industry is about platforms, discs and royalties. But things are changing, fast. Games are losing their physical form, sitting in an online store rather than shelves. Their nature is changing too, getting much smaller or more accessible, addressing a new relationship between people and gaming.

Videogames are starting to define platforms. They exist by themselves, spreading from one platform to another, no matter the nature. It can be a phone, computer, electronic device. They spread, often across multiple systems. Some simply cash in on communities, regardless of whether the game's good, or even a game at all.

From my early years involved in the world of videogames, I loved to observe the philosophy behind the platforms. Not just in terms of architecture but the way features are put in place physically, and the type of controller. How they were designed told you how to best direct your programming and creative thinking. Adding just two shoulder buttons on a controller gave birth to a generation of fun on the Super Famicom.

From my early years involved in the world of videogames, I loved to observe the philosophy behind the platforms. Not just in terms of architecture but the way features are put in place physically, and the type of controller

The importance of platforms in gaming applies to the business side, too. While many complain about royalties and limitations, one has to admit that, inside the boundaries of a platform, many companies have thrived, enjoying the relative comfort and safety it provides. In comparison, the freedom of the PC platform never really translated into the revolution some hoped for.

Now, you can make a game with a few people, on numerous platforms at a time and sell it as an online download. You just need to look at iTunes to realise there are tons of 'games' for just a few bucks. There are lots of guys in suits excitedly telling me that the future of gaming is bright. These people, who can't help asserting that "You know, I'm a gamer too" (I really hate that!), explain how we are going to enjoy the "full digital experience", beginning with an online purchase, leading to the possibility of taking it with us on a mobile, even sharing it with the community. They're good at envisioning business models. Well, I think they are. I mean, they are well paid to… Anyway, I can't help feeling that they are missing the point, and that concerns me. Or maybe I'm just a dinosaur who doesn't belong in this changing age.

You see, the Japanese videogame world is really console-driven. I can't help seeing DLC and app stores as being like the horde on its doorstep, ready to tear apart the city walls of traditional platforms. I'm pretty sure that many developers will drown in an ocean of inexpensive apps and disappear. A console isn't there just to provide a secure environment, but to lead and enhance the videogaming experience.

I have a hard time seeing what kind of enhancements the iPhone and Android platforms have brought to the gaming experience other than their business models, accessibility, pricing and portability. I'm not saying they're bad for gaming, just that they're not leading videogames anywhere as an experience, and they're not designed to. Videogames are just one aspect of their use.

But none of this brings me any closer to finding a new computer. I start to wonder if I should just put a Mini-ITX motherboard in a junk FM Towns. While I'm working on it, I'll pretend that computers are still exciting and original.





Media Create weekly sales, October 25-31

Game/weekly sales/lifetime sales

1. ***God Eater Burst*** (Namco Bandai, PSP): 263,150 (NE)
2. ***Winning Eleven 2011*** (Konami, PS3): 215,257 (NE)
3. ***Super Mario Collection Special Pack*** (Nintendo, Wii): 119,485 (427,240)
4. ***Pokémon Black & White*** (Pokemon, DS): 68,686 (4,311,998)
5. ***Golden Sun*** (Nintendo, DS): 46,516 (NE)
6. ***Kirby's Epic Yarn*** (Nintendo, Wii): 25,257 (153,170)
7. ***Solatorobo*** (Namco Bandai, DS): 21,915 (NE)
8. ***Fable III*** (Microsoft, Xbox 360): 20,025 (NE)
9. ***Naruto Ultimate Ninja 2*** (Namco Bandai, PS3): 19,090 (82,765)
10. ***Wii Party*** (Nintendo, Wii): 17,337 (1,155,964)

Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

Edge's most wanted

Golden Sun: Dark Dawn



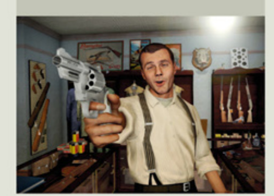
Although it arrived a little late to be reviewed this issue, there's a DS RPG-shaped void left in *Dragon Quest IX*'s wake that Camelot's little epic might be able to fill.
DS, NINTENDO

Steel Battalion: Heavy Armor



So Kinect's here, it works, and if used well it can do great things. Now we want something that pushes the device to its limits. From's mechs can surely do that.
360, CAPCOM

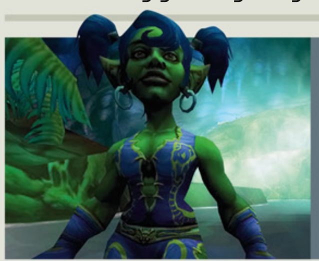
LA Noire



Rockstar's invited us to take a look at progress on its moody crime thriller. Can the game's facial animation possibly look even better? Report next issue.
360, PS3, ROCKSTAR GAMES

Drop the goblin

When fantasy games go beyond Lord of the Ringers



Several of the games we look at this issue began life in franchises that followed slavishly in the footsteps of Tolkien. Since achieving popularity, the differences from their inspiration, and from each other, have blossomed. But will we ever get away from goblins altogether?

On the face of it, *World Of Warcraft* ticks many of the boxes: there be dragons, dwarves and elves. There's magic and mithril silver. But having set out its stall, it has worked steadily to change its world. Orcs turn out to be from another dimension. The first expansion saw you voyage to Outland – a daemonic realm of floating rocks and starscapes that shares more with pulp sci-fi than Middle-earth. And, in fact, the Draenei are a race of space-faring folk who crash-land on Azeroth. Now, with *Cataclysm*, the goblins – a race of mechanical tinkerers, capable of knocking together motorbikes and robotic chickens – become playable.

So it is with other games: *Dragon Age*, most stolid and cheerless of all, has shed its Tolkien skin and emerged with fresh ideas. Now spanning a continent, the sequel has found its footing in a new art style, full of angles and sharp colours, while its fiction now describes a collision of frontiers, allowing its developers to cut loose with new and vibrant cultures.

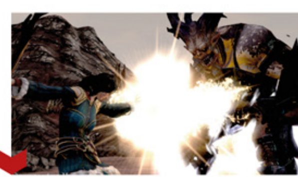
Guild Wars also transformed over the course of successive expansions from a pretty but largely unadventurous medievalist mulch into a world of some considerable personality.

"A lot of what you saw in the evolution of *Guild Wars 1* was our art department finding themselves," says lead designer **Eric Flannum**. "I think it's a very difficult proposition to create something wholly from nothing. I mean, Tolkien didn't even do that, right? We were a startup company; we hadn't made a game together as a team."

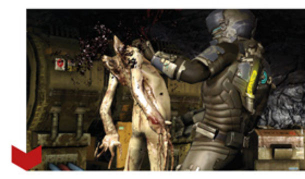
The sequel has gone all out: the Charr, once cut-and-paste beastmen, now construct floating fortresses made from iron shards – more closely resembling the Death Star than Helm's Deep. Even the dragons have shed their hoary lizard heritage, becoming skeletal creatures held together by magic.

But these ancient beasts won't simply lay down their heads and die. According to Flannum, the key is reinvention, not replacement. "It's very easy to dismiss them as being something that's been done to death," he says. "But when someone comes along and does them in a new, refreshing way, then that's when you get something really cool."

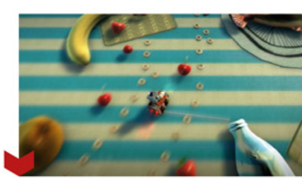
The goblin is dead. Long live the goblin.

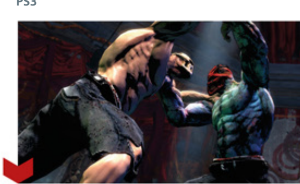












FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **BIOWARE**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **MARCH 8 (US), MARCH 11 (EU)**

Dragon Age II

A change in protagonist and a much-needed revamp of its combat system makes Dragon Age feel more comfortable in its skin



Rogues – like piratess Isabela, pictured – can draw upon some of the most ostentatiously enjoyable combat skills



***Dragon Age II* is happiest when it's skipping around in spurting fountains of blood. At times the violence is quite comic, particularly against Darkspawn enemies**

The term 'fantasy RPG' has acquired unfortunate connotations, either of Tolkien-esque impenetrable self-importance or Japanese depersonalisation. It was to *Dragon Age*'s advantage that it didn't conform. It had no amnesiac hero, no fated encounters, no powerful fragments of relics that must be reunited; it had a cast, and a script, and an attitude to conflict that preferred splashing around in gore and dismemberment to sterile, bloodless combat.

Rather than telling a grand and abstract tale of uprising against a great and untouchable evil – though that is, of course, the overarching thrust of the action – *Dragon Age II*, like every good BioWare game, is primarily a character drama. The eventual crushing of the Darkspawn isn't what drives you, it's the encounters, partings, failures, fears and romances of the characters. It's a story, not a saga.

"It's really the people of the *Dragon Age* world that speak for themselves," agrees *Dragon Age II*'s development manager, **Robyn Theberge**. "It's the people that you connect with, even fall in love with, that keep you going back and playing every day. You don't want to leave them in a sticky situation." This is the thinking behind *Dragon Age II*'s switch from *Origins*' voiceless, player-created protagonist to a Shepherd-like hero (or heroine), Hawke, with a voice, a personality and a family.

Any tale naturally becomes taller in the telling. *Dragon Age II* takes place in a framed narrative; you play through Hawke's legend, as related to a woman named Cassandra, who is searching for him for reasons yet unknown. Though the events – and the 'adult' themes – of *Dragon Age II* relate to those of *Origins*, you don't need to have played it to connect with this new story. "The aim was to create a new entry point, find a different story within the *Dragon Age* world," assures Theberge.

This narrative device sidesteps many of the issues that can make fantasy RPGs a chore to play through, giving BioWare the option to fast-forward through the downtime. "This is the longest story in BioWare history, spanning a decade, and the framed narrative has really allowed us to highlight the key points," says Theberge. "You're in the action all the time, whereas in *Origins* you had a lot of transitioning to do; you were travelling and talking to people, trying to get to the action, whereas here you jump from situation to key situation based on that narrator's perspective."

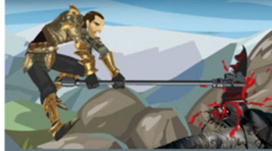
> The artistic direction is grimmer, less fantastical, but just as blood-soaked. Hawke and party still enter conversations covered head to toe in spatter from their last altercation

That narrator's perspective changes, too, depending on who is telling the story. In an earlier demo at Gamescom, we were shown a version of Hawke's origin story as told to Cassandra, in which he and his sister flee the village of Lothering on their own through a horde of Darkspawn, followed by Cassandra's own, much more realistic version. This is a neat trick that would suffer from overuse, but BioWare can generally be relied upon not to use the same twist twice.

Dragon Age II looks much better than *Origins*, particularly its Vaseline-dipped



Somebody, somewhere, will be upset that you can no longer pick an elf or a dwarf character with which to save the world



Social fantasies

Dragon Age has spawned a free-to-play Facebook game, which EA is taking very seriously, claiming that it "raises the bar for social gameplay". In place of the hyper-violence and realistic art direction of _Dragon Age II_, there's cartoon fantasy; instead of personable AI companions, you play with your friends, merrily accumulating items and currency that will transfer to the PC and console versions of the game. But the main purpose of _Dragon Age: Legends_ is presumably to spread awareness of the brand to those who missed _Origins_. We await the _Fable III Kingmaker_-esque iPhone app – and the accordant double helping of spam in our news feeds.

console ports. There's a grainier effect in place of the vague magical glow that emanated from every character, and the artistic direction is grimmer, less fantastical, but just as blood-soaked. Hawke and party still enter conversations covered head to toe in spatter from their last altercation.

Those conversations involve just as much interplay between the supporting cast as between Hawke and his interlocutor. They aren't two-way, predetermined exchanges, but arguments interrogations and stories, peppered with interruptions and judgements from Hawke's companions. The conversation wheel is newly decorated with an icon in its centre which broadly predicts the reaction the selected response will provoke – an olive branch for placation, a sword for aggression, a theatre mask for comedy.

Giving the protagonist a voice helps immeasurably with the credulity of the script and situations. But frequently chosen responses will come to form a part of Hawke's default personality; he'll begin to respond instinctively with aggression or sarcasm upon meeting someone new, or cry out to companions on the battlefield.

Combat itself has a more hack-and-slash feel, which meshes more easily with the thirdperson perspective. If you push a button, something actually happens; actions can still be queued, but playing the game in a more instinctive, action-game manner is now more rewarding. Enemies are relieved of their limbs in great showers of blood, and magic now looks as deadly as up-close bludgeoning. There's still complexity in the ability trees, and the option to switch between party members to experience something other than the warrior, mage or rogue archetype chosen for Hawke himself.

Dragon Age II is clearly a technical improvement upon *Origins*, and a conceptual diversion. It's now closer to the *Mass Effect* series in terms of narrative structure and attitude, despite its wildly different setting. In spite of *Origins*' commercial success, BioWare has chosen to revamp and redefine instead of reiterate, and that deserves recognition.







***Origins* on console suffered many compromises, foremost the interface and combat system. With a more *Mass Effect*-style conversation wheel and clearer prompts, at least some of the problems will be rectified**

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **ATARI**
DEVELOPER: **EDEN GAMES**
ORIGIN: **FRANCE**
RELEASE: **Q1 2011**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E214**

Test Drive Unlimited 2

In Eden's mad world, the dream in which you're driving is the best you've ever had



If you think *The Sims* is gaming's answer to reality TV, think again; nothing throws the natural, the fake and the flat-out peculiar into such close combat as *Test Drive Unlimited 2*. More Mulholland Drive than *Test Drive*, it opens at an impossibly luxurious beachside penthouse where Ibiza's it-crowd is rigidly dancing to the latest club hits. We see close-ups of faces, bared midriffs, spinning turntables, and a well-endowed (and physics-enhanced) lady's chest. Then it all segues into extreme slow motion.

From this rather unsettling stupor you have to pluck your basic avatar. Boy, girl, Asian, black, white: take your pick from these United Characters Of Benetton. Now, guess what? Yes, it's your birthday. The party's host, frustratingly a great deal sexier than any of the available avatars, has a surprise she knows you're going to love. A short walk from the balcony, through an unassuming door, is a garage that looks like Thunderbird One should be in it. The surprise: a shiny red Ferrari and a set of keys.

We drive for a while, passing a giant banner that reads 'BIENVENIDOS' until, somehow, into this dream float the words: "Not all of our handling models are in place, unfortunately. This isn't the latest build you're playing." We're bearing this in mind as there's a knock at the door. A what? Which door? Then more knocks, louder and louder until we finally wake up. It really was a dream, you see, and our character's just a valet who's nodded off in a client's car.

Its owner is Tess Wintory, the latest in a parade of detestable hedonists who serve as the game's mission merchants. Another is Miami Harris, who when she isn't behind the wheel has her hands around a handbag-sized pooch. Again, both are intolerably more attractive than your avatar, as if to suggest that, here of all places, true beauty is internal. We think it's polygonal, and that our character seems to be missing a few.

This is a real issue in a sequel heavily focused on avatars, especially when actually customising your character means a trip to a plastic surgeon you don't unlock until a few hours in. The base models seem enormously restrictive, making that initial choice a gamble. Such is life in a series where much feels like an experiment, both behind the curtain and beneath the hood.

> With sprawling grassland, shimmering sand and an unlikely off-ramp from a town on to a mountain trail, this is still the only game to put the 'open' in open-world racing

Enough time has passed since *TDU* for your sensibilities to be offended once again by the lightweight physics model, last-minute handling decisions, ugly signage and design oversights that have you wondering if it's spread itself too thinly. Enough time, in other words, for you to forget what playing an MMO driving game is actually all about. Give it time, though, and somewhere on the road between sprawling grassland, shimmering sand and an unlikely off-ramp from a town on to a mountain trail, you'll remember. With over 3,000km of road to explore, this is still the only game to put the 'open' in open-world racing.

In fact, very few racers even have a

Levelling systems

Despite the build numbers being the same throughout our multiformat playtest, the difference between formats is, for now, considerable. With settings maxed and anti-aliasing high, the PC version is simply gorgeous. The level of detail is high from the dashboard to the horizon, creating vistas begging for the improved Photo Mode. Shame about the shader aliasing, though. The 360 is an acceptable downgrade, the striking palette and post-processing doing justice to the terrain and weather types, while the 360 pad feels ideal on both formats. Then there's the PS3. Stick calibration was awful, creating a feeling of lag where the framerate was actually good. Lack of anisotropic filtering left the world looking soft and smudged, meanwhile, stripping cars of glamour.



Idiosyncratic to the last, *Test Drive Unlimited 2* features extensive on-foot sections in which, at the moment, you cannot run. As we're sure you can imagine, this has the potential to be more than a little annoying over time









It would be interesting to know what data Eden has regarding the first game's bikes, which this time arrive in DLC. How many played enough to unlock them, and how many switched straight back to a car?



The damage in *TDU* is superficial, limited to mere scratches. It makes crashes seem feeble and the cars feel like toys, but would you really want to drive miles for another panel beating?

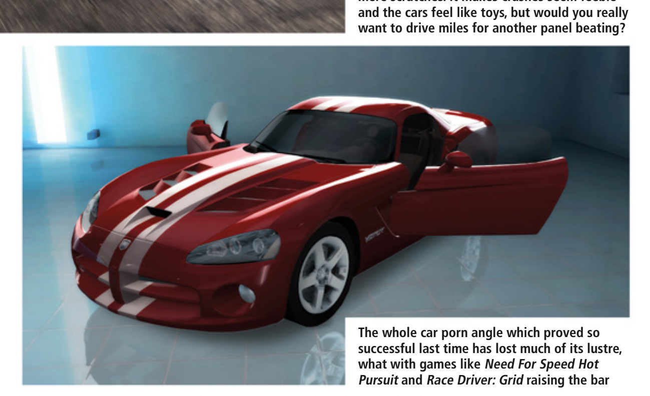
Negotiating a tricky hairpin bend while a popup celebrates a newly discovered hairdresser takes some getting used to, like so much in this game. And, yes, the unique physics will still send a car to the moon and back if you hit it just right

beginning at all; you fire the engine, touch the pedal and go from nought to understanding in a matter of minutes. This is different. Long before you level up enough to unlock air travel between Ibiza and Hawaii, *TDU2*'s world is overwhelming. What will it be like to scale various peaks in the new offroad vehicles, take a client's favourite car on a epic nail-biter of a delivery mission, or look back on a career as an accountant for an online car club? Six hours in, we can only imagine.

Alas, much the same can said for the game's handling. It's risky enough staging a press event with an online-ready 360 build, a PS3 version that seems happier offline and a PC version that doesn't even have a choice, but doing so with largely placeholder car handling is just asking for trouble. This was only explained to us when we remarked that the three assist options, Sport, Hypersport and Full Assistance, felt identical. So we went back, bought and traded cars, struggled with a ruinous two-car limit for our first garage, and finally found a model fresh off the production line, with handling informed by the game's ongoing closed beta. Eden has a dangerous tendency to add these things at the 11th hour, but it must said: the new handling models actually feel pretty good. Even more than in *TDU*, putting the pedal to the floor feels dangerous.

It's literally rewarding, too. With the levelling system now split between various aspects of the game – racing, exploration, etc – the addition of FRIM (Free Ride Instant Money) makes every daredevil manoeuvre, mini offroad adventure and mile on the clock worthwhile. *Burnout Paradise* did it first, of course, but only *TDU* has the scope to make it matter beyond your Gamercard. Put simply, driving with style in this game earns cash. Push a button and you bank it for use on cars, homes, furniture or avatar items; keep driving and you stand to earn a whole lot more, or lose everything with even the slightest mishap.

Eden Games is one of surprisingly few MMOG developers that genuinely thinks – and designs – for the long term. In its current state, *TDU2* is such a quirky and unnatural racer that just a couple of hours with it can feel like too much. Push past that, however, and an entire afternoon can feel like too little. Our biggest frustration is that so much of that time was spent grinding through overly granular training missions for every discipline and vehicle type, none of which felt necessary. You're making one of gaming's great adventures, Eden, so how about letting us discover it all for ourselves?

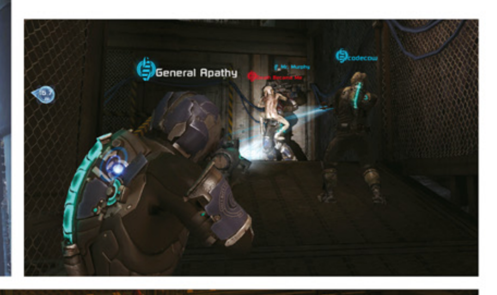


The whole car porn angle which proved so successful last time has lost much of its lustre, what with games like ***Need For Speed Hot Pursuit*** and ***Race Driver: Grid*** raising the bar









FORMATS: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **VISCERAL GAMES**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **JANUARY 28**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E211, E216**

Dead Space 2

Can Visceral Games translate gory horror into convincing multiplayer?

Each side has subtle advantages. The grim necromorph assassins can always see where Security Force players are and how much health they have, while the humans, searching corners and jumping at any slight movement, are tooled up

EA has spent more than a year teasing with titbits of information before suddenly unveiling *Dead Space 2*'s multiplayer in its full, finished form. It takes us into parts of The Sprawl yet unseen – containment areas smeared with bloody handprints, neglected hangar expanses housing crucial machinery – in tense four-versus-four struggles: gruesome, shambling necromorphs versus cautious, combat-suited humans.

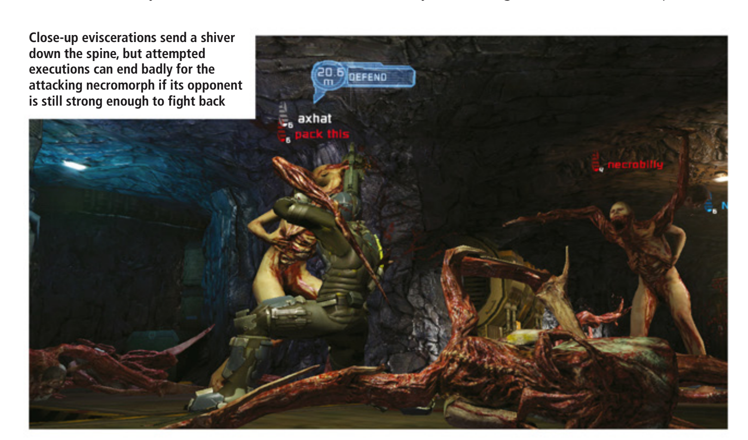
As the Sprawl Security Force, you have specific goals to work towards. In Solar Array, the first of the five areas, it's to repair control consoles in every corner of the complex and reactivate the machinery. In another, Titan Mine, the squad must retrieve and reassemble components of a bomb, protecting whichever player is carrying the cargo. As the necromorphs, there are no objectives except killing and disembowelment. Every time you spawn, you choose from one of four abominations and emerge from vents, pipes and hatches back into the fray.

Each necromorph accommodates a different style of play. Lurkers aren't robust, but can stick to walls and ceilings with a press of a button, letting you conceal yourself on the roof of a narrow corridor, watching for laser-cutter sights sweeping through the dark and spitting corrosive bile at the human player behind them. The Pack are deformed, scuttling, squealing, childlike monstrosities with strong melee and a leaping execution move.

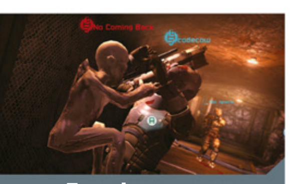
Spitters and the stomach-churning Pukers can absorb the most damage and charge up disgusting projectile attacks as well as flail their mutated limbs up close. When playing as the necromorphs, you can see the outline of a human skeleton inside the Security Force's combat suits, glowing blue or red depending on their state of health. When they're in a fragile condition, close-up executions can kill them immediately. Such moves result in an intense button-bashing battle, at the end of which either human or necromorph gets graphically dismembered. As the humans, you're constantly striving to protect each other from the onslaught, but seeing a teammate struggling to escape a mutant's clutches, it's difficult not to spray bullets indiscriminately in panic and accidentally kill them both.

With such variety on the necromorph side of the table, playing as the Sprawl Security Force looks like the less exciting option – but it's a much tenser and more strategic mode of play. Humans have the edge in terms of resilience and firepower – new weapons unlock with experience and powers like Stasis can still be resorted to in desperate moments – but the necromorphs' speed and unpredictability make them formidable. And frightening. Like Isaac Clarke in the singleplayer story, you're up against overwhelming odds, and victory tastes sweeter. Players left behind will certainly be overwhelmed. Necromorphs, meanwhile, can spawn from any direction, lunging suddenly from a dark corner or spewing from a corridor behind you.

Matches consist of two rounds, giving each team one chance to play as slaughterers and one as survivors. Forced into very different roles, your temperament changes with every round, swinging between grim, fearful determination and blood-hungry frenzy. It's a classic game of hunters and hunted, one that preserves the tension and horror ambience that defines *Dead Space*. Visceral has created – or discovered – a whole new facet of the franchise.



Close-up eviscerations send a shiver down the spine, but attempted executions can end badly for the attacking necromorph if its opponent is still strong enough to fight back



Experience pays

With four types of necromorph and just one type of boringly bipedal human, the variety on either side of the fight is a bit unbalanced, something that Visceral addresses with progressively unlockable guns and equipment for human soldiers, two of which can be taken out into the maps at once. The more you play, the better your chances with the Security Force, which Visceral hopes will keep players coming back beyond the first few matches. The necromorph experience, meanwhile, remains the same – gory, satisfying, but not persistent.


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Duke Nukem Forever

A case of "if you build it, they will come get some"?

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **2K GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **3D REALMS, GEARBOX SOFTWARE, TRYPTYCH GAMES**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **Q1 2011**

It works and it is *Duke Nukem* – this seems to be enough to send many away grinning, aware that they've been party to a little bit of videogame history. We're still unable to get our hands dirty with details, and when the dust settles, when expectations are reset within realistic bounds and the dazzle of its infamously tortuous development diminishes, how will *Duke Nukem Forever* be received?

That partly depends on how much you like dick jokes. The two brief levels we play really only hint at the larger game, but it opens with Nukem unleashing himself into a urinal. There are plenty of locker-room chuckles to come, from a face-off with a three-breasted alien megabeast ("I'd still hit it," says Nukem) to our flat-topped hero being pleasured by a pair of school-uniform-clad twins as he plays the final level of his own game. It's hard to say how much unreconstructed sleaze it's possible to excuse with irony. You'll laugh at times, but cringe at others. And you probably won't want to play it in front of your mother.

Having finished his business, Nukem paces out of the bathroom and into a locker room and from there through a set of corridors that lead to a football pitch. Fans of *Duke Nukem 3D* will recognise both the setting and the monstrous Cycloid Emperor – a gargantuan cyclops with spinning rocket launchers for hands – that awaits. It's possibly with arch intention that what ensues feels like any boss battle from the '90s. No glowing weakspots here – this is purely a matter of ammunition, and after a short few minutes of streaming rockets into the cyclops' health bar, it succumbs and drops to the floor. We activate the context-sensitive execution, forcing it to disgorge his eyeball before booting it between the goal posts.

Despite the introduction of a dash button and a recharging health bar (here labelled 'ego'), it all feels archaic and simple – but maybe that's the point. The game pulls back from this scene to reveal Nukem enthroned in his penthouse playing the very game that has taken so long to make. Does this videogame within a videogame hint at some sort of ironic contemplation of the game's limitations only to subvert them? Not really, although a later section does attest that Nukem's formula has been updated to a degree. After a brief and awkward vehicle section in which we swerve through blocky canyons, there's a showdown in a mining facility with familiar, piggy foes. They come from several angles, some etching away at Nukem's health from a distance, while others come running in for a close-quarters shotgun kill. When suitably enraged, they throw aside their weaponry, unleash a bestial roar, and pounce.

The AI certainly advances on that of *Duke Nukem 3D* – and creates varied, evolving battles – but the section also reveals evidence of the troubled, piecemeal development. Animations flit from one cycle to the next, clipping and movement feel slightly tricky, and, despite the unifying lighting and post-processing effects, there's still something not entirely coherent about the way game looks.

It's difficult to separate jubilation at Nukem's triumphant re-emergence from an appreciation of the game itself, but the open battleground of the mining facility holds definite promise that *Forever* is more than a nostalgia trip, more than a novelty. But the scars of the past are visible, too – a disparity in the details that speaks of the game being rebuilt and recycled, over and over. But is that a problem? After all, the man himself would say: "Chicks dig scars".

The game takes place 12 years after the events of *Duke Nukem 3D*. The aliens have returned – this time in peace, supposedly, but they're soon up to their old tricks (abducting women, mostly). The battle with the Cycloid Emperor on a football field (main) shows off the best of the engine: rain shifts across the playing field in sheets, and rockets explode with incendiary splendour

Bog standard

Forever hopes to honour 3D Realms' longstanding obsession with flushable toilets and working taps. In the locker room, you can scribble on a whiteboard detailing the plan of attack on the Cycloid Emperor. Currently the strategy entails the words "Operation Cockblock" scrawled above a picture of the Cycloid Emperor. We struggle with the controls to add a pair of breasts – just to get into the game's mindset.

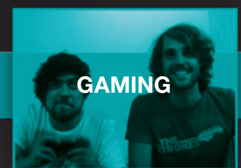
"There's all the interactivity you remember," says Steve Gibson, Gearbox's VP of marketing. "You can shoot hoops and lift weights. There's even a functioning pinball table in there. This may just go a little way to explaining why the game took so long." Naturally, the name of the pinball game is Balls Of Steel.

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FORMAT: **360, PS3, WII**
PUBLISHER: **THQ**
DEVELOPER: **BLUE TONGUE ENTERTAINMENT**
ORIGIN: **AUSTRALIA**
RELEASE: **FEBRUARY**

De Blob 2

THQ gives its colour Wii revolution a new spin on 360 and PS3 too





All kind of hazards spring up as your assault on the city progresses. If a turret gun lands its inky payload on you, it can leave a trail of colour-sapping ink until you've washed it off



Blue Tongue has recorded a local funk orchestra, and each new layer of paint brings in another instrument, building to a catchy track as the city grows in colour

De Blob was an unexpected and well-deserved success for THQ – a game that promoted individuality and expression through cheerful platforming mechanics. Like the gentle social dissension of *Jet Set Radio*, it asked you to splash colour over conformity in an open urban environment. It had an unusual road to release too, starting as a student project by an eight-man team from Utrecht's University and School of Art which was then purchased by THQ and brought to production quality by a developer down under. The sequel, wholly the creation of Aussie studio Blue Tongue, hopes to bring the cheerily rebellious air of the original to a wider audience, making a jump to multiplatform development.

Revolutionary though he is, De Blob's fight against monochrome mundanity has seen little in the way of extreme change for the sequel. Comrade Black, your nemesis in the first game, has escaped and found a new city to subjugate to his will, creating a place of uniform greys and mindless subservience. While once he dished out his palette-dulling directives from the platform of an evil corporation, this time he has taken on the role of charismatic religious leader, indoctrinating the hapless inhabitants through some kind of hypnosis.

As De Blob, you must restore colour to the world by absorbing paint into your globular form and bounding about, using yourself to daub the city, freeing the local populace and defeating Comrade Black's inky forces as you go. This time, to bring vibrancy back to certain buildings, you'll have to go inside them – mixing colours and accumulating a certain amount of paint to unlock the door. When inside, the game's perspective switches to that of a 2D sidescroller; a touch of *Metroid*-lite exploration, battling and puzzle-platforming sees you through, the section eventually culminating in a pulse of colour which radiates out from the conquered building.

The objectives are more clearly presented than before, progress periodically being halted while you deal with a set of ink-firing cannons aiming to lay waste to your painterly work. There are new enemies to deal with, too – Comrade Black's zealots operate remote-controlled drones that hypnotise you into throwing yourself onto hazards. Since even the game's creative director seemed to be getting irritated by these during our demo, we suspect their effects might be muted in the final design.

Taking a nod from *Super Mario Galaxy*, this sequel has been adapted to allow for asymmetrical cooperative play, with a second player directing paint splats to aid De Blob in his insurrection. In most other regards, part two looks to be more of the same, which is a little odd for a game about breaking the norm with chaotic diversity. But it's hard to begrudge the concept the larger audience it always deserved. *De Blob*'s witty animations, freeform play and funk soundtrack create a bright, bold style all its own. When so many family-friendly games aim for inoffensive and end up lacking in character, we hope *De Blob* leaves its mark.



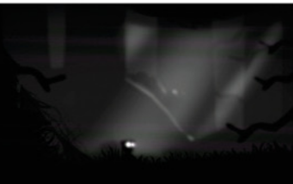
A new flick of paint

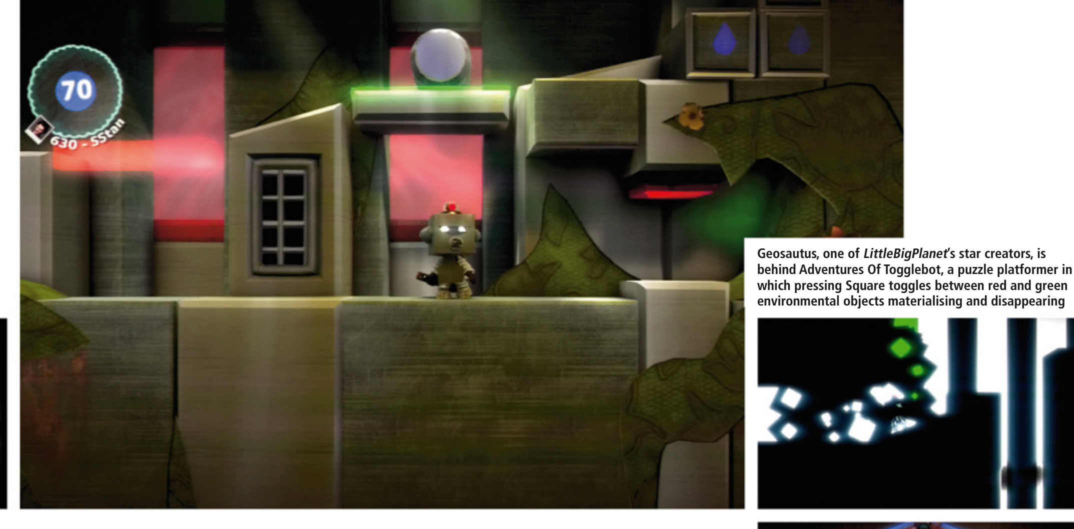
One of our few annoyances with the previous game was that imprecise gesture recognition sometimes made platform-scaling a bit of a bungle. With the shift to multiplatform, jumping has now defaulted to being controlled by a button press – even on the Wii version. Traditionalists can use the old control setup if they want, though, and recreate it on PS3 thanks to Move support. Aside from a general simplicity evident in the environmental structures, there don't seem to be many major issues as a result of the game's crossplatform nature.



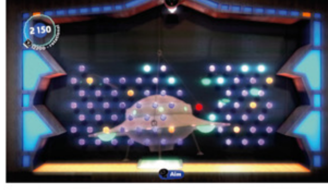
The 360 version we've seen looks bright, crisp and clean, with nifty depth-of-field and lighting effects that we'd be surprised to see on Wii as well, but its lack of geometrical complexity marks the game out as a multiplatform release

XslevenX's Limbo Chapter 1 copies its source right down to the secret found if you run the other way at the beginning, though its protagonist is a decidedly perkier character





Geosautus, one of ***LittleBigPlanet***'s star creators, is behind Adventures Of Togglebot, a puzzle platformer in which pressing Square toggles between red and green environmental objects materialising and disappearing



FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SCE**
DEVELOPER: **MEDIA MOLECULE**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **JANUARY**



Facing interface

Media Molecule is well aware that *LBP*'s menu system was far too simple to adequately navigate the high seas of its two-million-plus creator levels. On paper, its ideas for *LBP2*'s interface appear much improved, such as allowing creators to brand their planets so players can get a flavour of what they're about, pushing their hearted levels to the fore and providing a feed of PSN friends' activity. But the interface is currently badly cluttered and hard to navigate. Counter-intuitively, live links are shaded grey while inactive ones are blue. It's easy to cancel a level from loading by impatiently tapping X because the game's still downloading its creator's over-decorated planet – and such planets have a tendency to obscure the levels they're meant to promote. By this mark, official website LBP.me, forced to resort to lowly text lists in the absence of the luxury of high-end realtime 3D, might well be the best place to browse the game's juiciest fruits.

LittleBigPlanet 2

Is Sackboy's jump from platform gaming to gaming platform a success?

Over 7,000 levels into the beta and none feels finished. Not one has fully explored the lattice of ideas and technical ingenuity from which it's made. Some barely function. Others are named 'concept' and end just as they're starting to get interesting. Many are knockoffs of other games. It may not sound like it, but this is one of the most promising game betas yet.

The field seemed open back at this point during the first *LittleBigPlanet*'s beta, but time proved that even then, creator levels had already quickly formed into the genres that would go on to dominate the game's Cool Levels. The pastiches and proofs of concepts, like the *Shadow Of The Colossus* and *God Of War* levels, LittleBigCalculator and Sweet Child O'Mine, demonstrated vast invention and imagination, but only within its three-plane 2D. Very few approached quite the intensity, polish and wit of Media Molecule's own levels. But the few story levels Media Molecule has packed in with *LBP2*'s beta feel distinctly traditional compared to what the community is up to.

There are music videos and sketch shows. There are '80s-style videogame arcades. There are platformers, on-rails shooters and a Japanese-style RPG. There are faithful recreations of a remarkably divergent set of classics, from *Portal* to *Flow*. There are test beds for animation techniques and electronic logic boards. The community is restless, and showing no signs of settling down.

Highlights so far include Fyshokid's Stereo/Mono, an abstract rhythm platformer. Its white platforms black out in time to an electro soundtrack, making you pause before jumping into inky nothing. Though handsomely and smartly designed, what's particularly admirable is its audio – the music, made with *LBP2*'s sequencer, dulls when the level blacks out and develops with iMUSE smoothness as you progress.

Denj092's RPG-Concept is far more derivative, but intentionally so. Somehow, *LBP2* has been bent into the brief adventure of a Sackboy encountering and fighting a dragon, complete with menus in which you can equip your hero with an alternative sword and armour. The battle is classic *Final Fantasy*, with options to attack or use items. Not that the beast puts up much of a fight – the level ends after just a few rounds. Presumably the infrastructure required to get it working is enough to fill the editing mode's thermometer, but as an exploration into what *LBP2* can do, it's revelatory.

At its end, it automatically jumps players into another Denj092 concept, this time for *Assassin's Creed*, which demonstrates the flexibility creators have to tweak controls. Sack-Altaïr behaves just as his original does – hold R1 to run, R1 + X + direction to climb. The controls' closeness to the original is faintly unnerving. It's unnerving, too, to see *Micro Machines*' iconic breakfast table in *LBP2*, made by Splapp-me-do, and with the addition of breakable eggs. The multiplayer mechanics don't work – the camera doesn't track first place, meaning that the leader tends to get lost offscreen and booted out of the game – but the handling's close.

The original *LBP*'s levels never really escaped feeling distinctly *LBP* – now, that barrier is down. The question has become one of why would we want to play all these divergent game types in Sackboy's world and not in Flash, as Xbox Indie Games, on an iPhone or anywhere else bedroom coders and indies are active. In another few thousand levels, we'll know the answer. For now, though, Sony's 'platform for games' schtick is looking more legitimate by the day.

RPG-Concept's battle is introduced with a transition that sets the screen shaking. Control is restricted to the Attack and Item menus, but the results are effective



Stereo/Mono (top) uses green and red highlighting to indicate routes and threats. Chimpanzee's Pegged (above) is a single level from ***Peggle*** without bonuses or powers, but its ball physics are well implemented

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **NAMCO BANDAI**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER 26**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E218**

Splatterhouse

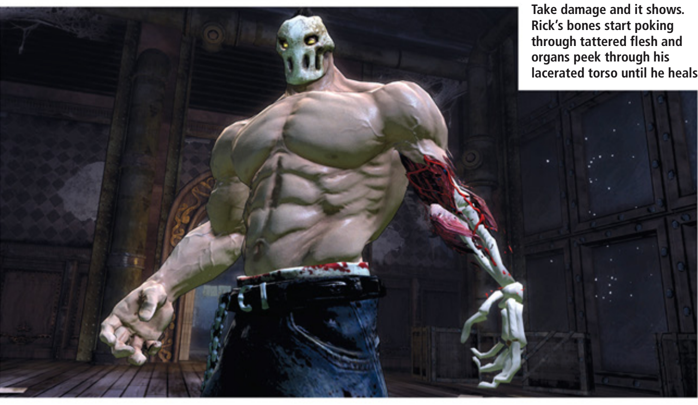
Namco makes a grisly return to its horrifying brawler



Naturally, weapons are spread around. On one occasion, Taylor batters enemies with his own severed limb, echoing *BioForge*







Take damage and it shows. Rick's bones start poking through tattered flesh and organs peek through his lacerated torso until he heals

Splatterhouse doesn't have much time for subtlety. Mere moments after the end of the opening movie – in which hero Rick Taylor is convinced by a talking mask that the only way to save his girlfriend from the cackling madman who's just kidnapped her is to wear said mask and become a cross between the Hulk and Jason Voorhees – the walls and floors of the tutorial arena are slick with demonic blood. To be fair, *Splatterhouse* is faithful to its source – Namco's 1988 video-nasty-styled brawler of the same name – and wears its B-movie aspirations with some pride.

The haunted mansion in which *Splatterhouse* takes place wouldn't be out of place in a theme park. The walls are a lurid purple, doors open and slam shut as Taylor lopes by, and bubbling test tubes hint at ghastly experiments. There's even a dungeon complete with pale, withered arms grasping for the player from the confines of dank cells. All this has been brought to life in a comic-book style, with thin black outlines around character models painted in bright colours. Your tour guide through this location is the mask itself, which sneeringly comments on Taylor's surroundings and provides useful exposition. It's not a pleasant companion – aiming for a Krueger-like menace but achieving little more than blunt coarseness – but it does function as a bloodthirsty cheerleader during combat.

Taylor has the standard range of light and heavy attacks, which can be strung together into combos, but in a genre where acrobatic prowess and magical, physics-defying weaponry appear as standard, there's something prosaically bar-room about his approach to a scrap. Granted, the bar would need to have a thorough scrubbing once he was done, but getting to that point requires little more than basic combo mashing. One interesting twist is Taylor's ability to syphon health from enemies during combat. Doing so uses up his supply of 'blood' (read: magic), and monitoring the relationship between the two bars is an important part of staying alive. Once enemies have taken enough of a beating, their black outline turns red, and Taylor can enact a gory QTE finisher with merely a tap of B. During our demo, at least, enemy variety was limited enough that these finishing moves – in which Taylor will, for example, tear a monster's jaw off and then rip out its still-breathing lungs – swiftly lost their shock factor, but it's possible that this will be mitigated by the presence of more monsters in the full game.

Between brawls, Taylor can improve his attributes and purchase new moves via the standard thirdperson action title upgrade screen. It's a predictable inclusion, but the moves we've unlocked suggest the potential for more complex combat as the game continues. *Splatterhouse* has undeniably succeeded in paying respect to the gory arcade original. The question that remains to be answered is whether it has the ambition to surpass it.





The gory finishers turn the analogue sticks into representations of Taylor's arms, requiring you to push them apart to tear enemies limb from limb

Two-dimensional pain time

***Splatterhouse* often segues into sections played from a 2D perspective. Rather than simply performing the function of gimmicky homage, these sections feature platforming challenges otherwise absent from the game, as Taylor must leap over gaps made lethal by machine-powered traps. Worryingly, hacking through the waves of basic enemies that these sections throw at you isn't that far removed from the game's fully 3D combat, and suggests that a downloadable, *Bionic Commando Rearmed*-style update of the original games might have made for a more astute return to the franchise.**

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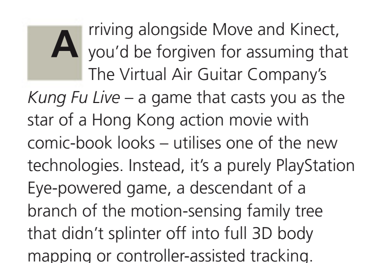
• Game sold separately.



FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **VIRTUAL AIR GUITAR**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **FINLAND**
RELEASE: **2010**

Kung Fu Live

Wax on, wax off, fly behind a giant's head and kick him in the neck



Arriving alongside Move and Kinect, you'd be forgiven for assuming that The Virtual Air Guitar Company's *Kung Fu Live* – a game that casts you as the star of a Hong Kong action movie with comic-book looks – utilises one of the new technologies. Instead, it's a purely PlayStation Eye-powered game, a descendant of a branch of the motion-sensing family tree that didn't splinter off into full 3D body mapping or controller-assisted tracking.

And it works, even if the precision offered by Move and Kinect has softened some of the force of its blows. Standing in front of the screen, you watch as an image of yourself is neatly snipped away from its background, scaled down accordingly, and dropped into the midst of a side-scrolling brawler. The experience is unlike most camera games that simply present the player as a Godzilla-like figure looming over miniscule non-player characters in the foreground. And whereas in those games some general flailing gets the job done, here the player's small size encourages users to be accurate with their kicks and blows in order to make it through the game unscathed.



For the most part, ***Kung Fu Live*'s motion-sensing tech seems to work well, though our dark jeans in a dimly lit room did lead to a somewhat disconcerting rippling, ghost-like trail replacing our legs at one point. It tracks movement well enough to follow kicks and punches**







Players are asked to strike some rather odd poses before being stitched into the comic-book-style cutscenes (top)

The tricky bit is navigation, with the back alleys and pagodas that make up *Kung Fu Live*'s levels usually taking up more space than say, your living room. Special gestures activate attacks that allow your digitised self to zip across the screen, and, during one boss encounter, even fly. The result is a slightly exhausting piece of martial-arts-themed slapstick, which inevitably forgoes sophisticated combat mechanics in the hope that sheer silliness will see it through.

Presumably aware of the risks of motion-tracked brawling, Virtual Air Guitar allows only one player to motion fight in multiplayer, with up to three others fighting via joypads and giving their friend a rather aggressive workout. It's a suitably amusing way to play an unabashedly exuberant game, but we wonder if *Kung Fu Live* will be worth the test of stamina when its initial novelty fades.

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **FUNCOM**
DEVELOPER: **STUNLOCK STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **SWEDEN**
RELEASE: **TBC**

Bloodline Champions

Stunlock's debut takes the grind out of competitive arena brawling and injects some adrenaline

Good things come to those who wait, they say, but Stunlock Studios clearly doesn't think anyone should have to. Its debut game, *Bloodline Champions*, takes its inspiration from the *World Of Warcraft* arena but eschews that game's required homework. Instead of character levelling and gradually unlocking abilities, players choose one of the 16 titular bloodlines – each of which wields seven unique abilities – and head into battle with a full arsenal. It's grind-free competitive play.

Such streamlining permeates the whole game: rounds are capped at two minutes, followed by sudden death; matches last for no more than 15 minutes in total; and mana is dispensed with, abilities only tempered by a short cool-off period. Three game types are available, with five-on-five Team Arena flanked by Capture The Artefact and Conquest (variants, of course, on capture the flag and king of the hill).

The game is played from an overhead perspective and set in tight arenas, with line of sight having an important tactical role as pieces of scenery become impromptu shields. From the off, those arenas explode into a riot of warm and cool hues, the various volleys of magic chipping away at health bars while other characters teleport out of trouble. It all looks rather chaotic at first sight, but we're assured that everything becomes clear after you chalk up a couple of battles.





The group of graduates who formed Stunlock began development of *Bloodline Champions* in their last year of university





Classes ('Bloodlines') include Gunner (ranged), Ravener (melee) and the wonderfully named Psychopomp (healer)

Champions' bite-sized approach is allied to a free-to-play option. Non-paying players can choose from four bloodlines, which rotate each week. Additionally, 'Blood Coins' – earned during battles – can be used to purchase everything from costume items to making a bloodline permanently available.

While there is a danger that Stunlock's efforts to strip out so much could leave a core that struggles to satisfy in the long run, the game's sheer energy looks likely to satisfy adrenaline junkies.

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RAZING THE GAME

On the eve of the Cataclysm, Blizzard reveals the method behind its creative destruction, and how, in WOW's development, nothing is sacred

TITLE: **WORLD OF WARCRAFT: CATACLYSM**
FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **ACTIVISION BLIZZARD**
DEVELOPER: **BLIZZARD**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **DECEMBER 7**

Within Blizzard, every game has a codename. *Diablo* was known internally as Hydra. *StarCraft II* was Medusa. *World Of Warcraft*: *Wrath Of The Lich King* didn't get anything as dramatic. *Wrath Of The Lich King* was known as *WOW* Expansion 3. On December 7, Blizzard launches the follow up: *WOW* Expansion 4, now known to the world as *Cataclysm*.

Cataclysm is a well-thought-out, well-planned, well-presented disaster. It uses the geologically violent return of a long-awaited dragon to rip apart the continents of Kalimdor and the Eastern Kingdoms, and rebuild them from scratch. Cities are remodelled, rivers diverted, zones re-quested. And it's the best thing that could ever happen to the world's most successful game. Why did Blizzard decide to destroy the world? How did it reach this point? And what does it mean that more than 12 million players are delighted to see their home from home torn apart?

The answer begins with those prosaic codenames, at Blizzard's plush development campus in Irvine, California. The company relocated to a purpose-built, multi-storey, multi-building space in 2008. Already, it appears to have outgrown the space: valets double-stack the cars in the car park, desks are jammed into every space possible, and there's a steady stream of non-industry service visitors who ask the security guards: "What do you make here, anyway?"

Answer: the most successful videogame in the world.

The *World Of Warcraft* team has been making *World Of Warcraft* for ten years. While many of the early design leads have moved on to other projects (most noticeable has been the slow drip of talent across to Blizzard's next-gen MMOG team), the core team has remained in place nearly forever, and it maintains its size and scale. Over the last ten years, Blizzard has been consumed by the production and maintenance of



WOW's geography provides to players both context and goals. New zones like Twilight Highlands are dominated by major architectural landmarks

THE NEW ZONES ARE A FASCINATING BALANCE. THE CHANGES IN PACE, DELIVERY AND TONE ARE DRAMATIC



Chris Robinson, art director



J Allen Brack, lead producer

World Of Warcraft – growing beyond measure, pushing all art and development resources possible into expansions and updates. Now, the *WOW* team is still the biggest Blizzard employs, but has to share the company with many other teams, working on *StarCraft*, *Diablo* and the company's next generation of games.

What the *WOW* team has is experience. With two full expansions under its belt, it has learnt a lot about making an MMOG. Few developers understand the mechanics, playerbase, technology and art of a game like the *WOW* team. And few teams have had the same opportunities to test theories and practicalities.

Of the nearly 150 staff on the *WOW* team, the advocate and project manager is **J Allen Brack**, the game's lead producer. Articulate and precise, he's a veteran of Sony Online Entertainment who joined Blizzard in January 2006, as the *WOW* team was struggling with two competing headaches: how to build entirely new content for the game's first expansion, while continuing with live content updates and new patches.

As Brack said in an interview for *World Of Warcraft*'s five-year anniversary: "The team had a good idea of what they wanted to do; they just didn't have the best process for how they could go about doing it. The team was inexperienced in working on an expansion and patches at the same time. They only had one mode." The team that had spent so long building *World Of Warcraft* was struggling to come to terms with the idea of running a subscription business alongside an ambitious annual expansion release schedule.

Today, the story is very different. The 60-odd developers that launched *WOW* have grown to a team of 150, practised in the art of multitasking. Working methods have mutated and evolved, new disciplines and roles created, experiments and assumptions tested against a vast population of players. The *WOW* of today is a very different game to the *WOW* of 2005. And the team at Blizzard, a group of people that has created what must surely be the world's most profitable game, is about to destroy it and start over. Why?

Brack explains that the beginnings of the *Cataclysm* came out of the early concepts for *Wrath Of The Lich King*: the Death Knight class. The Death Knight let players level up an entirely new character, with new abilities, a new resource mechanic, and an entirely new style of play. "We were getting towards the end of *Wrath Of The Lich King* development," Brack says, "and we didn't necessarily know how well the new class was going to come out. We knew that we didn't want to do a new class, but we got really excited about doing two new races – one for the Horde, and one for the Alliance."

The *WOW* team had already been down this path in the *Burning Crusade* expansion, which added the Draenei (bizarre space-goat things with customisable beards) and the Blood Elves (magic-addled elvish dropouts). In *Burning Crusade*, all-new starting areas were added for the new races, but at level 20 they were kicked out into the old world, to continue down the same well-trodden quest paths.

"Doing two new races and building a new level-one-to-20 experience would be great. But then you have the level-20-through-60 experience that players have done many times," says Brack. "We realised that if we did two new races, we'd have to do an entirely new one-to-60 experience, or create an entirely parallel one-to-60 experience. But we had to do *something*."

That something came from some of the old *Warcraft* lore. Similar discussions were taking place within the story team, trying to figure out what story the expansion should tell. "The story and features have equal weights at the beginning of the process," Brack explains. "That's when we started to narrow in on Deathwing [a disgraced and demented dragon which has been licking its wounds underground for decades] as a potential villain."

The stage was set. The idea of a parallel one-to-60 levelling experience was dropped. Instead, the *WOW* team would rebuild the entire world.

Development began on a test. The Blizzard team began with an old zone, Darkshore, and began to cut it up and destroy it. If Deathwing was to burst through the world and bring destruction, then the team had best figure out how to show the wreckage. Darkshore was chosen for good reason: the quests there are mostly tedious, with one major quest town to the north, and a seemingly endless hand-in run that has to be repeated multiple times along a road running parallel to the beach. Once seen as moody and atmospheric, it's devastatingly dull to play through today.

The rebuilt Darkshore was a failure, albeit an interesting one: the team went to town on the destruction, carving great chasms and craters into the land. But it made it near impossible to navigate, with players routinely falling into pits and struggling to get out.

But what worked were the new quests. *World Of Warcraft*'s quests are maligned, and with good reason. One of your first tasks when starting as a new gnome is to kill troggs, 14 at a time. Then kill boars in batches of 12. And then retrieve six boar ribs for a meal. It's hardly the stuff to



For *WOW* players, the waves of nostalgia as you quest through old haunts can be overwhelming. Dun Morogh has long been a fan favourite

inspire gripping anecdotes, and it's no wonder that Blizzard CEO Mike Morhaime has pointed out that 75 per cent of *WOW* players never make it past level ten.

But how the quest team within *WOW* builds and designs its quests has radically changed since it worked on the *Burning Crusade* expansion. Now, there's far more emphasis on items and actions over straight fauna killing. A simple emphasis on items and context-sensitive widgets in the gameworld means that *WOW* now has a broad vocabulary. Use dynamite on mammoth to receive mammoth meat. Use flare-gun on town to activate steam-powered helicopter bombing run. What's more, quests used to be dumped on players, 20 at a time, as they entered a new town. Now, they'll be given out piecemeal – completing one opens the next, which opens the next. Players progress through mini-stories, or giant lore moments. They might free a village of sentient seals from attacks by angry Vikings, or equip the undead Forsaken with a new plague for an epic betrayal. And, thanks to 'phasing', a way for the designers to display major changes in the world following a questline, players can actually see their effects. In *Wrath Of The Lich King*, Blizzard nailed phasing: when a pivotal battle plays out in a cutscene, the players are confronted with the destruction wrought. All of that new technology and design learning had to be integrated, otherwise the old zones would become a laughing stock.

The new zones in *Cataclysm* are a fascinating balance. Play through the new gnome starting area, Dun Morogh, and you'll see real progress. Gnomes now begin by escaping from their irradiated city, Gnomeregan. Then they start pushing back the trogg forces that still remain – by blowing up a mechanised army, by sneaking into their old towns or by riding into battle with overpowered leaders. The changes in pace, delivery and tone are dramatic. The new early *WOW* zones are funnier, cleverer, and more engaging.

But they're not as ravaged as you'd expect. In Dun Morogh, there isn't an



Goblin Theft Auto

Blizzard has long been willing to parody every gaming series going. Now you can add to the list *Grand Theft Auto*: the new goblin starting area has you grabbing a buggy, driving around an industrial city of goblin vice, picking up hot green chicks and bullying debtors. PopCap followers may also recognise this sort of scene (below left)

inkling of Deathwing's ascent. Instead, a few towns have moved, and new zones have opened up. But there aren't great cracks in the ground, or vast volcanoes. It's calmer, more serene.

As Brack puts it: "We're not changing the things that matter. The signature quests are still there. The things you didn't enjoy, the times when you're asked to kill 12 gnolls – we think there's going to be far fewer of those. That's the goal. Take the things that you don't remember out, and replace it with something better. Keep the things you really had fun with, the signature quests."

The old zones' revamp is just part of the story. Veterans will quickly head to the new zones, which add a further five feathers on to *WOW*'s level cap. The new zones are deliberately, hilariously gimmicky. Vashj'ir is set almost entirely underwater, with a few subterranean caves, and a sunken city. The new phasing tech is used heavily: players enter the zone via a giant octopus which strikes down the ship they're travelling on. The first quest hub is the upturned carcass of the boat, containing a pocket of air.



The jury's still out on how players will navigate the 3D underwater combat of Vashj'ir. But a seahorse mount is almost certain to salve any complaints

"THE THINGS YOU DIDN'T ENJOY, WE THINK THERE'S GOING TO BE FAR FEWER OF THOSE. THAT'S THE GOAL"

Uldum is *WOW* versus Egypt, stone cats and pyramids bumping up against the ancient guardians of Blizzard's MMOG, the Titans. Mount Hyjal has been available in various raids and dungeons before, but here, finally, players get to poke around the site of the cataclysmic battle at the end of *Warcraft III*. Deepholm is a truly vast underground cavern, Deathwing's former home. It also contains a truly spectacular image – giant crystals suspended in mid-air, forming a pillar to the cavern's roof, hundreds of metres above.

The sum total of this development effort: 3,000 new quests, with two thirds of them devoted to 'old world' content. *Wrath Of The Lich King* shipped with just over 1,000.

What's more, these new quests are testing well. The *WOW* development team includes a 'strike team', comprised of a mix of hardcore and casual gamers, that plays through the game without input from the developers. It meets to give feedback, but *WOW* developers are not allowed to listen the criticism directly. "We have someone in the room who we can trust to pass on the feedback," says Brack. "For *Wrath Of The Lich King*, that was Jay Wilson, the game director on *Diablo 3*. For *Cataclysm*, Jeff Kaplan [now working on Blizzard's next-generation MMOG] ran the teams. Meanwhile, the whole company participates in family and friend beta tests, using an in-game feedback tool. Then we collect feedback from both customer service and the forums."

Most importantly, the *WOW* team acts on the feedback. "There's hundreds of things we've changed for every single zone based on the feedback – if only to make things more clear, more obvious," says Brack.

Meanwhile, *WOW*'s vast art team is in constant production mode. Leading the art development on *World Of Warcraft* is **Chris Robinson**, the game's former lead character artist. *WOW* art production is a vast, overarching job, ranging from producing broad concepts and character designs to making widgets and props for the world. And there's thousands upon thousands of them to be made.

"Oh, god," laughs Robinson when we ask about the scale. "It's not just that there's thousands of unique props… but then there's the iterations. We build, say, a goblin aid machine because a quest needs it over here. But then the world team will say: 'Great – now can you build another one that uses the materials of this zone that doesn't have bamboo?'"

Streamlining that development has required reshuffles and rethinks. Before *Wrath Of The Lich King*, the *WOW* team had multiple art and prop teams – one for dungeons, one for the world. That had to be fixed, and fast. "Props are such a primary part of the game," says Robinson. "They breathe so much life into the world wherever we put them that they had to have their own team and focus."

The relationship between art and design in *WOW* is symbiotic. World designers fall under the design umbrella, and concepts are created as extremely rough paper templates before the artists even begin work. "We can't say: 'It would be really, really cool to have miles of rolling hills here'," explains Robinson. "The designers will say: 'We need to have three pyramids here, they need to be identifiable, and visible from here, here and here. They need to be here and here for lore reasons, or game design reasons'."

The art team then creates extremely rough blockouts, to get a feel for the space, before beginning what Robinson calls "paintovers", putting in colour themes and palettes, making the space begin to work. "We discover what's working and what's not: 'We really like these two pyramids, but the view of this third one is blocked by the patch of trees.' We'll work with design at that point," he says. "'Can we move anything around to make it work?'"

It's a testament to *WOW*'s art team that silly in-jokes like the Murlocs still remain amusing eight years after launch

Giant lore moments, like a player's first view of the Maelstrom, are handled carefully. Players must mount up and fly into the storm to enter Deepholme

The back-and-forth between art and design is constant. Robinson: "At the start of each expansion, the key leads for the art and design team will get together and consider the base ideas. Something might be a great design idea, but artistically it could just fall flat. Maybe there's a new race of dragon men, which by themselves are kinda boring. Maybe there's a way to say they've been subjugated by someone, to give them a bit of a flavour hit."

It's a high-pressure management job. "Crunch isn't too bad, because our production team does a great job of scheduling the process," says Robinson. "The weird thing about art direction is that players think it's just about defining the visual style of the game. But we're at, I think, 56 artists, each of whom are very individualistic. They're *artists*. They have very specific needs at times, and can be very emotionally affected by what fans write on fansites, or by internal pressure."

There's perhaps a hint of Spongebob Squarepants in the new underwater areas, but they're certainly striking

But art and quests aren't the whole story. There's an entirely separate game within *World Of Warcraft* that means more to a certain type of player than levelling a character or exploring the world ever could. It's a game that requires intense cooperation and extremes of coordination. It's raiding. And in raiding, Blizzard is cementing a new kind of cooperative entertainment. The core idea: get a big group together and beat the tar out of opponents in carefully choreographed, mechanically diverse fights.

Leading the raid development is **Scott Mercer,** a Blizzard veteran who graduated from the *Warcraft* and *StarCraft* teams, and who has a controversial view of how *WOW* raiding has found success.

"People have jobs. People have families. People have friends," he says. This is not what you expect to hear from a designer responsible for what many view as one of the most hardcore, time-consuming and high-pressure activities in gaming. *WOW* certainly didn't invent raids – they're a clear carryover from games like *EverQuest* and *Dark Age Of Camelot*. And in the early years, *WOW* raids resembled *EverQuest*'s: epic, unwieldy groups fighting in vast caverns. But many of the more casual MMOG audience drawn to *WOW* took one look at 40-player fights like Ragnaros, a giant angry fireball, or the sweary raid leader culture, and went to play elsewhere.

Then something weird happened. Raiding began to change. Raiding became accessible. Almost casual. Raiding adapted to the playerbase. New raids in *WOW* don't appear every expansion. They appear on every content patch. Vanilla *WOW* released with just a handful of 40-man dungeons, bolstered over a constant stream of patches. Each new dungeon didn't just add new bosses and new loot, it carefully tinkered with the game design. Enrage timers appeared – meaning players had to kill a boss within a certain time limit – therefore preventing fights from stretching on for too long. Raids were first able to be saved while in progress, and then that savegame could

Gnomish technology can rarely be relied on. It'll either explode messily or teleport you into space. It's no wonder that the evil gnomes are so moody

"WE HAVE HARDCORE RAIDERS WHO WANT TO BE HIGHLY CHALLENGED, AND OTHERS JUST WANT COOL LOOT"

be extended week after week, allowing raiders the chance to slow down their progress. New ways of rewarding players began to appear: rather than just picking up items after a boss kill, each player would be rewarded with badges after the victory. If the boss didn't drop what you needed, you'd still be rewarded for taking part.

Raiding is the equivalent of a carefully choreographed scripted dungeon, and by bundling more players into a group, the designers are more able to showcase new mechanics or new ideas. In the overworld, *WOW* players simply hit stuff until it falls over. In the dungeons, the bosses test players' skills, communication and gear.

It's raiding that demonstrates the *World Of Warcraft* team's transition from game developer to software iterator, able to change systems and philosophies in direct reaction to the player's concerns.

"It's the greatest gift as a game developer, working in the online space," says Brack. "It's the idea that we can try something, and if it's not quite right, that's OK. We can do it later. It just doesn't really exist in the traditional games market."

And the Blizzard team iterated. The amount of organisation required from players decreased, 40-player raids were phased out, 25-player raids became the norm in *Burning Crusade*. Then the required organisation dropped again: ten-man raids are the acceptable face of *Wrath Of The Lich King* raiding.

The fights got weirder, too. It isn't just about healing damage – it's about dancing out of firepits, or dragging bosses around the edges of rooms. It was about separating out the four horseman of *WOW*'s apocalypse, and praying your healers could keep everyone alive, even though the groups were spread across a room. You'd fight a giant spider, having to interrupt doing damage to free your raid-mates from being strung up against the room in webs.

By patch 3.1, Blizzard had raiding nailed. It released Ulduar – the best dungeon to date. Ulduar is a vast prison holding a





Dungeons benefit from the *WOW* encounter design team's experience. It long ago figured out that the fun is in fighting the bosses, not running to your body

Cthulhic god named Yogg Saron. To meet him, players must first drive through a gauntlet of a thousand angry dwarves and steampunk helicopters, while piloting siege engines and catapults. They must defeat a giant robot, and his Voltron-suit-wearing master. They must kill a dragon and survive an arena fight while half the raid runs upstairs to fight the ringmaster. One room is a giant conservatory, patrolled by violent trees and a stone goddess. Finally, having rescued multiple prison guardians, they face off against the god itself, in an exhausting encounter that involves hallucinations, elephant men and giant tentacles.

Reminiscing about Ulduar, Mercer nails why the dungeon saw so much traffic. Within the design, the Blizzard team dramatically decreased the difficulty of the dungeon. But on top of that, it layered hard – or 'heroic' – modes that would appeal to the dedicated core raiders.

"It let us provide a much broader amount of content to our huge population," says Mercer. "We have very hardcore raiders who want to be highly challenged, through to players who just want to have friends when they're raiding, defeating cool bosses, getting cool loot. They want to be challenged, but not taken to the edge."

The new raids coming to *WOW* in *Cataclysm* are direct extensions of that philosophy: smart amalgamations of lore and mechanics. Players are asked to fight a two-headed troll (Cho'Gall), or a golem-powered automated defence system. Or they can fight wind elementals on floating platforms in the clouds.

And the requirements on players are even fewer. Now, ten-man raids drop entirely the same tier of loot as 25-man ones. And once you've defeated a boss in one mode, it's no longer available to fight for a week in the other. Now, *WOW* players can't min-max by attempting ten- and 25-man bosses in the same week. The *WOW* raid team is deliberately lowering the time players can spend raiding.

How is a raid made? Mercer explains that the process begins with a very broad discussion with the design leads on *Warcraft*. They lay out "who are the villains, and what the high-level story elements we want to hit are. We know we're going to end with Deathwing, but who are we going to fight along the way? For Blackwing Descent, we had this idea that we could continue Blackwing Lair. What if you went back to Nefarion's throne room [a previous *WOW* boss, the final encounter in vanilla *WOW*'s Blackwing Lair] and discovered a portal behind the throne? We thought we should make it Nefarion's laboratory. At that point we draw a very basic layout. We know what the final boss for the raid is, but we don't know what's going to be in between."

Those sketches, frequently shown at events like Blizzcon, are as basic as you can imagine – merely a series of labels and squares with boss names. But more learning has gone into their makeup than their wireframes might suggest. Mercer: "We've learnt from experience what makes for a good *WOW* raid. We know how to move players around; we know when to wing [split off the raid into separate areas that can be tackled by players in any order they choose] or not to wing; we know how many bosses make the raid feel fun."

Levelling levelling

Tom Chilton, a lead designer on *World Of Warcraft*, is tasked with balancing the maths and stats that underlie the game's combat models, so he's in a strong position to identify flaws. From his perspective, *WOW*'s failings lie in how the game communicates with new players.

"From a high level, there's lots of things wrong with it," he says. "If you're new to MMOs, or RPGS, or even to PC games, it can be brutally hard to learn in the first half-hour. Time and time again we watch new players come in to play the game. They're not familiar with mouselook or WASD and all that stuff. They heard somebody say: 'This game is really good,' but they're thinking: 'I don't really know what I'm supposed to be doing.' In the grand scheme of it, we're lucky if they even figure out that you can right click on the quest giver to pick up the quest. "

Then the team sits with Alex Alfrasabi, *Warcraft*'s lead world designer, and figures out what goes in between.

"We start jamming out ideas for what each boss will be," says Mercer. "Alex also makes sure that we don't put inappropriate creatures into the area – at a very basic level, for instance, if we go into a huge lava zone, we don't want water elementals. Then it's just a case of brainstorming new ideas."

The *WOW* raid team is made up of magpies. Some bosses come from new assets produced by the substantial art team. "We see the model and constantly look for places where it could fit. Or we might have our own idea, and want to build something off the back of it." Some ideas come from other games, like Trial Of The Champion's homage to *Ikaruga*. Others might just be to test new technology, like the vehicle gauntlet at the beginning of Ulduar.

For *Cataclysm*, three dungeons will be in the game at launch, the idea being that each will occupy a group for an evening. Bastion Of Twilight and Blackwing Descent are straight dungeon runs, while Throne Of The Four Winds is an awe-inspiring temple in the sky, clouds spilling from the base of its spires, where players are bounced from platform to platform.

Development on *Cataclysm* continues. As we visit, the team has around two weeks to finish off the rest of the game. Content is complete, but there are still mechanics to fix, numbers to tweak. The current forum outrage suggests the numbers that define class balance and damage at the top end of the game are out of whack. The hardcore are up in arms. The balance team is working furiously to fix the maths, but the problems don't seem to dampen fans' enthusiasm.

As players and developers gear up for the launch of *Cataclysm*, a new achievement – 'Stood in the Fire'– has been added to the game. You earn it by being in a zone that the newly freed Deathwing attacks. If it appears, the sky darkens and the horizon fills with fire. And then the dragon flies overhead. If you're there, you're killed instantly. It's a measure of how excited *WOW*'s playerbase is by the incoming devastation that players will flock to such an event. And die laughing.



The *WOW* tech may be ageing, but it's still capable of handling fun mini-cutscenes rather than telling you what happened with reams of quest text


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MANIFESTO DESTINY

CAN GUILD WARS 2'S BOLD PLAN OF REINVENTION POINT TO A THIRD WAY FOR THE MMOG?

Many have noted that the MMOG toils beneath the shadow of its market leader, with lesser games aping its every move, surviving on crumbs from Blizzard's high, high table. *Guild Wars* has never quite fitted into that picture. Many said it wasn't even an MMOG because of the heavy use of instancing, and its rejection of a subscription fee set it at a distance from RPG fare that demanded hours of grind to pad out its players' progress. Even though it still spurns a monthly fee, the sequel can be said to be an MMOG proper with its vast persistent world – and yet, as it moves closer to the literal definition of the genre, it has set about re-examining its conventions. In the manifesto trailer which outlines its radical intent, ArenaNet says that if you like MMOGs, you should have a look at *Guild Wars 2* – and if you hate MMOGs, you should *definitely* have a look.

Putting 250 years between the sequel's world and that of the original has helped this reinvention, allowing ArenaNet to make significant changes to the feel and function of its fiction, elevating its races from their original archetypes and freeing the game from the restrictions of fantasy convention. *Guild Wars*' artists deserve a tip of the hat for their work – remoulding the game's aesthetic to something so otherworldly that its fragmentary floating cities and eldritch technologies rub shoulders with the unconstrained futurism of science fiction.

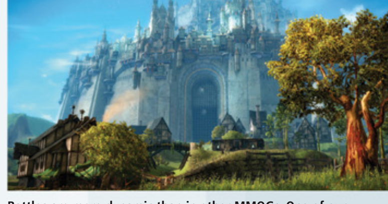
Yet the way the game now looks is perhaps the least profound departure here. Combat, classes and the way players cooperate have all been dramatically reassessed. Battles in *Guild Wars 2* are no longer a protracted exchange of blows in which players sit back, stack up commands, and watch numbers trickle from their enemies' heads. Now every stab, every shot, every searing blast of elemental magic must be enacted with a click – and ArenaNet has worked hard to make each feel significant.

"Combat in MMOGs tends not to be the best combat in the world to watch," says lead designer **Eric Flannum**. "It can often be very stiff. What we wanted to try to do was bring action into MMOG combat without actually making it a pure action game. We didn't set out to make it a shooter or anything like that – but we thought that we could give it a more visceral feel. We felt we could encourage positioning more, and we could make the skills a lot flashier so that you really had that kind of visual interest in what you were doing."

Part of this comes from more closely marrying your actions to the control of your character. No longer can you click on the environment to move there – you must use the keyboard WASD keys to navigate at all times. Nor will your character automatically move into range when ordered to attack – selecting an enemy merely highlights it as a target.

TITLE: **GUILD WARS 2**
FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **NCSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **ARENANET**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **TBC**





Battles are more dynamic than in other MMOGs. One of our favourite skills for our Charr elementalist sees him rapidly roll away from a fight, leaving a flaming trail behind him





"Auto-attack tends to muddy the games that it's in," says Flannum. "You lose the connection of 'I used this skill, therefore it caused me to animate in this way'. We wanted our combat to feel more engaging and active."

It does indeed. But if it also sounds like this might bring micromanagement to a genre that generally enjoys a degree of abstraction, it has its control benefits too: many actions can be executed while on the move, and their effects change – giving you directional attacks with melee weapons. A good number of spells require you to designate the area of effect, or direct a blast in a particular direction; being able to move around your enemies to maximise the number your attack hits is essential. The necromancer can conjure a row of necrotic arms from the soil, which radiate out to claw at enemies; a Charr elementalist, meanwhile, unleashes a Tasmanian Devil-style spin attack – the whirling column of air can then be directed physically using the WASD keys, sending enemies flying.

As these examples suggest, the combat of *Guild Wars 2* has been designed for spectacle. Only a few of the more basic attacks lower themselves to a mere exchange of particle effects – most describe their power through a sense of physicality, movement and searing pyrotechnics. There's a spell which summons a dragon's tooth to plummet from the sky on to an enemy's head, walls of flame can be deployed with precision as barriers or buffs (arrows shot through them will catch fire), and necromancy brings with it a host of gristly familiars – fiends that appear to be made of spines and offal, glistening and palpitating as they swoop upon their prey.

ArenaNet says the idea is that you spot these powers from afar and say: "I want to do that." And there's a good chance you'll be able to, with the traditional rigid classes abolished in favour of a more fluid system.

"We wanted to do away with a lot of the stringent class roles that MMOGs often impose upon players," says Flannum. "It's not the best experience in the world to have to play with someone based solely on what profession they are. We'd rather that gamers be able to play with their friends and that their friends have the leeway to make the kind of character that they feel is interesting. So, we don't want you to have to play with that monk you don't really like all that much because he's the only person that plays healer. And we don't want you to have to sit around for a half hour looking for a healer. So we tackled that by making our professions very versatile and allowing them to switch roles in combat. What that means is you go into a fight, you look at the situation and then your character can be versatile enough that you can react to whatever you've got in front of you. We try to make our combat not only dynamic in the sense of encouraging movement and making it very visually distinct, but also by making it dynamic in the sort of choices that players make."

"WE DON'T WANT YOU TO HAVE TO PLAY WITH THAT MONK YOU DON'T REALLY LIKE BECAUSE HE'S THE ONLY PERSON THAT PLAYS HEALER"

Every class can tank, every class can attack at range, every class can heal themselves, and resurrect others too. The second half of your skill bar is devoted almost entirely to powerful defensive abilities determined by your character's race – shields, buffs and cure-alls – while the aggressive former half is defined by the weapon you currently have equipped. It's a system designed to exploit a preference of two weapon sets, which can be flipped between at a moment's notice, radically altering your character's abilities.

"I tend to play the elementalist," says technical director **Rick Ellis**. "If I'm going to be out playing on my own, or doing something where I just want to level quickly, I can carry a dagger around and just kind of AOE all over the place and wipe out lots of creatures to stack up XP. But then if we're doing a PVP match I'll throw a staff on, because it gives me other abilities where I get ranged, and some AOE on top of that."

Though this system allows for huge flexibility, the way your available skills are determined by profession, race, traits and any number of other choices seems to be far from obvious. When rolling a new character, there are so many decisions to be made that ArenaNet must hope that the joy is to be found in the discovery.

"Profession is probably the biggest choice that you make," explains Flannum when we ask for a breakdown. "Every profession has a sort of big, central, unique mechanic and determines what weapons you can use. A ranger using an axe and a warrior using an axe have a different set of fight skills. So, for example, most of the ranger's skills are for throwing axes, and his first skill allows him to ricochet the axe between multiple opponents. Whereas the warrior is more traditional: you're going to walk up to people and beat people in the face with the weapon. But we also allow warriors to use bows, to be actual ranged damage dealers rather than just using the bow to pull in monsters. Race has an effect on the second

GUILDY GEAR

"We're not going into super-high detail on player versus player until we've got the details ironed out," says Flannum. "The basic plan is that there are two types of PVP in the game. There's what we like to call competitive PVP, which is what *Guild Wars 1* players would be used to: small team versus small team. The second type of PVP is world versus world, which would be called servers in other games, matched up against each other in week-long epic fights that have no limits on how many people can participate. You can have castle sieges, catapults, mortars, battering rams and boiling oil to pour on people. All that good stuff. It's like if you were inside a big strategy game and you were one of the units."





Eric Flannum (top) and Rick Ellis: the brains behind the remould









The Charr have evolved from the shamanistic beastmen of the first game. Firearms are now common



"We try not to have a super-long learning curve," says Flannum, promising a reduction in grind

half of your skill bar. Then you have traits, which are things that you go out and earn in the world that can affect your skills. So, for example, this one skill now heals people when it hits in an area – that sort of thing."

There are more personal questions asked of you, too. Although ArenaNet is aware of the attraction of MMOGs as social platforms, it claims to have a storyline as involving as any singleplayer RPG. Background questions determine the direction the story takes – choose a harsh upbringing on the cruel streets and you'll find yourself facing off against your old gang of hoodlums; conversely, nobleborn types will set about rescuing kidnapped toffs.

"Then you have the personality system," says Flannum. "It records how you act with NPCs, gives you a personality and then at certain points will allow you to act on that personality. So if you go around being mean to everybody, your personality might be barbaric, and then you might run into a situation where a barbaric person has the opportunity to punch someone in the face. Or you might be a very charming person and get to sweet-talk someone."

Although the success of this will mostly rely upon ArenaNet's skill at worldbuilding, we wonder how well a rich solo experience will mesh with a game which otherwise emphasises cooperation. Although going alone is more than possible given the ability to heal yourself, you can't enlist the AI henchmen seen in the game's predecessor. ArenaNet hopes instead that informal alliances will form naturally among players, and that even unsociable sorts will find themselves diving into battle with others ad hoc, without obligating any lasting commitment to a group.

ArenaNet has approached this challenge at both a tactical and strategic level. Characters of different classes can combine their skills to unique effect – as previously mentioned, an elementalist can lay down a flame wall which will ignite companions' arrows; the necromancer's undead minions, when subjected to a poison cloud summoned by an ally, can then pass on the infection to those they attack; warriors can boot enemies into traps laid by rangers.

At a higher level, ArenaNet has attempted to steamroll obstacles to cooperation. "You



actually cooperate with people without grouping with them and without communicating with them explicitly," says Flannum. "Players should never have to worry about another player coming along and kill-stealing – they should never have to worry about another player competing with them for limited resources. A lot of games get around that through party systems – we extended that and said: 'OK, what if we gave people shared goals? What if you're not in a party, but the game takes a look to see who's accomplishing what and rewards people accordingly?'"

Part of what makes ArenaNet's dynamic events system successful is the scale at which questing occurs. Upon finding ourselves in the human starting area, we're immediately embroiled in a large-scale battle against the centaurs, which quickly escalates into a boss battle with an elemental – a giant pair of earthen hands that rise from the ground amid a whirlwind of boulders and uprooted trees. This is one of the smaller encounters – as we see for ourselves when we aid in the destruction of a Shadow Behemoth in a swamp and then, later, take on the sky-scraping Shatterer Dragon.

The latter encounter is a striking one, fought on a rocky plane of lurid indigo, hemmed by dark mountains. Bright, violet lightning periodically forks across the sky. The Shatterer Dragon itself, animated from slivers of iron levitating among a sizzle of pink plasma, offers three targetable points at which to pummel him, and though it is perhaps disappointingly static, the battle is anything but. The dragon's corrupted minions spill forth to harry you, and dawdling players will be easily frozen in one of the Shatterer's crystalline attacks. Powerful but static gun emplacements offer an early means to whittle away at the creature's health, but these quickly get destroyed. Then, wounded, the Shatterer attempts to recoup its health by summoning crystal shards from the earth – each of which must be destroyed quickly.

The fray is a good demonstration for the way players are encouraged to flit between roles, resurrecting teammates, tanking minions, and zapping the Shatterer from afar. While this and the other sections we play have clearly been selected for the spectacle they offer, ArenaNet insists that this is characteristic of the game as a whole.

"WE DON'T CHARGE A MONTHLY FEE. WE DON'T HAVE TO MAKE OUR MONEY OFF KEEPING PEOPLE PLAYING FOR EVER AND EVER AND EVER"

Certainly, starting players should not expect to spend much time collecting rat spleens or spider chitin.

"I think one of the reasons we can do that is because we don't charge a monthly fee," says Flannum. "We don't have to make our money off keeping people playing for ever and ever and ever and ever."

While more mundane fetch quests are perhaps inevitable, even they occur within the context of a world that is subject to dramatic, player-driven change.

"Events occur in chains and they can often have lasting effects on the world," says Flannum. "There's this brood mother who drives the fishermen out of an area – if no players come along and defeat the brood



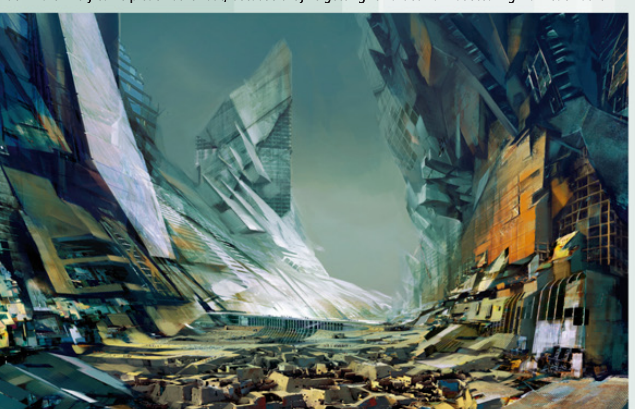
Flannum: "The different choices that you make that affect the power of your character are very separate from the choices that you make that affect the story of your character"





"Because we encourage players to view each other as partners," says Flannum, "you'll find that players are much more likely to help each other out, because they're getting rewarded for not stealing from each other"







mother, the fishermen can't fish, the supply of fish dries up, and the merchants in town will have what they can sell altered."

There are other, grander examples, too. The war between humans and centaurs plays out in realtime, enveloping players in a tug-of-war that spans the landmass. This isn't an event which simply resets every ten minutes – the centaur forces are locked in a continual battle for territory with human forces, the result of which players can then influence.

"When the map first loads, the centaurs have a base camp quite a way into the map," says Flannum. "They start conquering territory, and if no players come along, the centaurs are just going to win and start advancing across the map. These invasions are persistent: any place that gets taken over by centaurs is going to stay that way until some players come along and try to fix it. There can be a lot of back and forth: the centaurs might hold the human garrison or they might be pushed all the way back to their camp. Players might be *in* the centaur camp, trying to keep them from coming back. The idea is that players get into this big world that can have all of these different states – they never quite know what's around the next bend."

There's one other vector by which ArenaNet hopes to build cooperation among players – something tech director Ellis refers to as "the extended experience". Essentially, this means ensuring players always have a connection to the game and their fellow players, even when they're not at a computer, building in support for the game's social systems on iPhone and other portable devices. But ArenaNet's plans go beyond chat apps, hoping to allow players direct influence on the world.

"You can always participate in the game by helping your guild along with things that are sort of secondary to the game itself," says Ellis. "Crafting is a good example. When people are playing a game they tend to want to get with their friends and kill monsters. Things like crafting take a back seat to that, so we want to give them a chance to do it when they can't actually play the game – say they're riding the bus home from work, or they're on a lunch break. So that's what the extended experience team is all about: finding ways to get as much of the game experience on to a mobile or web device."

Ellis fears players will cry inequality if iPhone owners get any clear advantage over those who don't have access to an Apple mobile device, so profoundly asymmetric interaction of the kind mooted by *Dust 514* and *Eve Online* is probably out of the question. But that doesn't mean the extended experience will prevent players from getting their hands dirty.

We ask if ArenaNet has considered giving remote players some sort of spectral ability by which they could still engage in combat, or buff their guildmates. "Er, possibly," offers Ellis. "We have ideas about how to have a mobile player become part of a party – there are a lot of options there. We could consider trying commander-level type things, where you have a view of the world that the players themselves can't see."

Aware that *Guild Wars* clans looking to make the leap to the sequel may do so gradually, there's also some continuity with the previous game, with chat enabled between the two titles. *Guild Wars* veterans will inherit titles, weaponry and attire based on their achievements (as commemorated in the Hall Of Monuments available to players of the *Eye Of The North* expansion). Ongoing additions to *Guild Wars 1*, meanwhile, will continue to lay the foundations for the sequel's storyline.

With *World Of Warcraft*'s own rebirth well under way, there's always the risk that *Guild Wars 2*'s attempts to break with convention may end up looking less radical than ArenaNet would hope. Its upturning of traditional class roles was presaged by *World Of Warcraft*'s own shape-shifting druid class, and with *Cataclysm*, Blizzard promises to reinvigorate that game's starting areas in much the same way as described by ArenaNet, eschewing a good deal of the grind that so often defines low-level play.

Nonetheless, ArenaNet's insistence on selling boxes rather than subs proves that there are developers in the space who aren't in thrall to Blizzard's behemoth, and its action-biased combat creates a need for movement that few other other MMOGs can claim. If all ArenaNet's manifesto achieves is to prompt other developers to take a look at the *World Of Warcraft* template and question just what they really need from it, then it'll have started a welcome revolution indeed.



CLEVER GIRL

Having played as a ranger in *Guild Wars 1*, we recall many instances of frustration with our forest friends – so we're relieved to hear that the pets have been given quite a substantial intelligence boost this time around. "We're always working on the AI of our companion animals," says Flannum. "We're not close to being done with it yet, but we want rangers to have a pet that can be micromanaged really well. At the same time, we want the pet to act pretty intelligently on its own." Character creation in the demo currently allows a choice between bear, dog and moa (a reptile-chicken thing) – and we spotted at least one player with a big cat at his heel – but ArenaNet isn't yet saying which other creatures will be charmable.

Warren Spector

The man behind gaming's darkest worlds on bringing choice and consequence to The Magic Kingdom

System Shock, *Thief*, *Deus Ex* and now *Epic Mickey*. You'd think it would be easy to pick the odd one out from **Warren Spector**'s back catalogue. But Junction Point's creative director contends that it's not – his latest project may feature a famously family-friendly cartoon mouse and it may have been certified 'E for Everyone', but it could turn out as smart and deep as his earlier work, juggling simulation and emergent strategy to create a cross-genre adventure that evolves with the player's own whim. We talk to Spector about development under Disney and what the world of *Epic Mickey* is set to inherit from *Deus Ex*'s dark dystopia.

The common perception is that Disney has reinvented itself following the acquisition of Pixar in 2006. Since you joined in 2007, have you felt a change in the company?
Honestly, no. I hate to burst your bubble. You know, I think the acquisition of Pixar was the recognition that they were making Disney-style entertainment. I started talking to Disney before the Pixar acquisition – we had our first conversations in 2005 – and what struck me then about Disney was that it was still very much the company that I had grown up with – a company full of creative people with a mission that was very explicit. When I went to Pixar and had a meeting with John Lasseter, the first words out of his mouth were: "We make entertainment for everyone." There are people, especially in the core gamer community, who would say that means we're not making edgy, dark, adrenaline-rush entertainment. And that's fine – there are plenty of games that cater to that.

But there have been *some* changes since you've been there – Lasseter bringing back hand-engineered animation, for instance. Is there some kind of renaissance going on?
It's great having a creative director like John Lasseter, that's for sure. And look at what's happening with the parks with things like World Of Color [the night-time water and laser show at Disneyland California]. There's certainly a feeling under Bob Iger [Disney president and CEO] that there's a creative resurgence. Getting Oswald the Lucky Rabbit back is huge, and the focus on videogames is a big change for Disney. The acquisition of Pixar and Marvel – there's a lot of exciting stuff happening. And you know a lot of that is probably attributable to Bob Iger. He's been a driving force.

Because Disney's been in family entertainment for so long, is there less snobbishness towards games than you see in other old-media institutions?
You know, honestly, that's a speculation. I'm not sure. What I'm comfortable saying is that Disney the corporation has always been about innovation. If you think about the first synchronised sound cartoon, the first colour cartoon, the first feature cartoon, the first multi-plane animation, the first stereo sound in a film, the first theme park, the first Hollywood producer involved with television, the first robotics in everyday life, the first full-length CG movie…

Hang on – the first robotics in everyday life? When was that?
Animatronics. The first time anyone saw a robot. Well, OK, the first time anyone saw a robot was in 1939 at the New York World's Fair, but other than that, the first robotics in everyday life. You know, for the people who went to see Pirates Of The Caribbean, or the Enchanted Tiki Room, that was probably the first robot they ever saw. It's not that big a leap to say: "We should be at the forefront of interactive entertainment." It's a place where Disney's comfortable.

As somebody who's been involved in lots of M-rated games, and also genuinely mature games, do you feel defensive that what you're doing now is going to be perceived in some way as being for kids?
No, not at all. First of all, I think that if people want to prejudge, that's their problem, not mine. And also, I'm at a point in my life and my career where, you know, I've done a lot of games about a guy looking like the mighty Thor and carrying a broadsword, and I've done a lot of games about guys who wear trenchcoats and sunglasses at night. I want a change of pace. I don't know if this is the rest of my career, but I want a new kind of challenge. I remember sitting in the dark watching Enchanted looking at all of the different groups of people – a middle-aged couple, a young family, a granddad and grandkid, an elderly couple – and I just thought: 'Why don't games do this?'

> "I've done a lot of games about a guy looking like Thor and guys who wear trenchcoats and sunglasses at night. I want a change of pace"

You've been involved in a lot of games that have shooter elements, but you've also spoken out quite strongly against games that are frivolously violent. Where do you draw the line artistically?
I'm often mistaken for a guy who is prescriptive. I don't want to tell other people what to enjoy, or what to make. Just for me personally, I like there to be a reason for things. The thing I have a real problem with is when we offer virtual



Warren Spector worked with Origin Systems and Looking Glass before founding Ion Storm Austin and developing *Deus Ex* and its sequel. He founded Junction Point in 2005, where his team is making Wii exclusive *Epic Mickey*

violence and we celebrate it as opposed to pointing out the consequences of it. That's a large part of the reason why the choice and consequence idea is so important, because it gives us the opportunity to have a dialogue with the player instead of just patting them on the back for pulling a virtual trigger. I just think that's weak. Most games are not much more interactive than a movie. They're about: what gun do I use to kill everything? That's the kind of choice you get to make. Or: do I want to be all evil or all good this time? Years ago, a writer for **Edge** sat me down and the first question he asked me was: "You're a moral relativist, aren't you?" I don't believe in good and evil or absolute right and absolute wrong, so why would I make games that even allow that as a possibility? It would be a violation of everything I believe about the world. If other people don't see it that way, that's fine – I don't believe in the intentional fallacy either. But the bottom line is, I don't judge, or I try not to. I don't believe in games that allow you to play the meter, you know – I'm evil, I'm good, I'm light, I'm dark. I think that's… suboptimal. And so in *Deus Ex* there were as many people who thought you were a jerk for killing everyone as for killing no one. The game doesn't judge – you judge yourself. That, I think, is the main difference between what I do and what other people who make games of choice and consequence do. To be frank, I think that probably compromises my games from a commercial standpoint because people like simple answers and I don't like giving them. And there's at least one point in every project I've worked on where I beat my head on my desk and say: "Why do I always do everything the hard way? Why don't I just make a shooter?"

> "In Deus Ex there were as many people who thought you were a jerk for killing everyone as for killing no one. The game doesn't judge"

In *Deus Ex* every option that's available to you has some sort of horrific sting in the tail. Is that really how you see the world?
Absolutely. There's nothing that comes without cost. There's a cost to being a pacifist. There is a cost to being a warmonger. Why would games not reflect that? If we're really going to be interactive, if we're really claiming to collaborate with players, then let them express themselves through play. Why would we not express that complexity? The key thing is, I never want players thinking about any of this – it's theirs, it's subtext. It's part of a philosophy of design. That sounds pretentious, but I don't care. Players should never think about that. Like in *Epic Mickey*, most players aren't even going to realise they're making choices. I want them doing what is fun for them, and only if they play it multiple times, or if they talk with other players about how they solved problems in the game, only then will they start to see that they were making choices.

An early look at Eidos Montreal's *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* paints a positive picture. What essential *Deus Ex* qualities do you think it would be easy for a developer to get wrong?
Well the easiest thing to get 'wrong' – in air quotes, please put air quotes around that – would be judging. Allowing players to solve problems in a variety of ways, but really knowing in your heart as a developer that there's a right one – that would be the biggest problem. And I say that because, even on *Epic Mickey*, I've had to sit some team members down, even people who are very experienced developers. They'll give me one choice which is so clearly right that they can't answer the question: 'Why would I not do that one?' And by the way, it doesn't look like [the developers of *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*] are making that mistake. I think they get it, based on a few conversations I've had.

Would you personally have gone for a prequel rather than a sequel?
I don't know. I think with *Deus Ex: Invisible War* we went too far into the future. We lost some of what made the game special, which was that it's just around the corner – it could happen tomorrow. And so I think if I had done it, I probably would have done what comes right after. But I'm fine with people doing a prequel. The cool thing is being a part of something that has a life beyond me. There was a team of people who created something bigger than themselves; I feel kind of like a proud dad. Whatever [Eidos Montreal] do, I can't wait to play it.

Early concept art for *Epic Mickey*, which involved a heavily decomposed zombie Goofy, suggested that it was going to be surprisingly adult, ironic and self-aware. How far were you able to push that with Disney's existing icons?
That's more for you to say than for me. I knew that this was not like a *Deus Ex*, where it was a world of my creation and I could do whatever I wanted. You know, we're dealing with one of the most recognisable icons on the planet in Mickey Mouse. The guy's on all of our pay cheques, right? So I knew early on I needed to figure out where the creative box was. I literally make a box with my hands when I talk to my leads and say: "OK, here's the boundary of this game. As long as you stay within this, you get to fill in all the details. But if you stray outside of it, I'm going to push you back into the box." But the other thing I always tell teams is, if you think you've gone far enough, go 20 per cent further. I will always pull you back if you've gone too far but I don't want to risk not going far enough. And the way to define where a line is, is to cross it.

There are still dark elements in the game?
Oh, heck, yes. There's one location in the game in particular where I think: 'I can't believe they let me get away with this. This is awesome!'







Spector's games include (from left to right) *Thief: The Dark Project*, *System Shock* and of course *Deus Ex*. Asked which ending he would have opted for in *Deus Ex*, had he not designed it himself, he says: "It depends on my mood. I'm a big interconnected guy, but there's something kind of creepy about giving up individuality and privacy like that." It's nice to believe in a benevolent dictatorship, though? "Yeah," he says. "I wish I did"



"I've watched people play *Epic Mickey*, a lot of people," says Spector. "A lot of people have asked me the question: 'How do you make a game challenging enough for adults but easy enough for kids?' The reality is exactly the opposite. You have to make it challenging enough for kids and easy enough for adults"

Disney loves scaring kids. Every fairytale is about dark and light. I mean, when Maleficent turns into a dragon in Sleeping Beauty – that gave me nightmares for years.

What about the self-awareness? The inclusion of Oswald seems to hint at the world of Disney beyond the cartoons themselves – how characters like Mickey have been commodified and become icons.
If people want to read that into it, that's up to them! But certainly the opportunity to work with Oswald was incredible as an animation fan – I mean, I wrote my thesis on cartoons and I took animation history classes at university, so I was pretty psyched when they told me I'd get the chance to reintroduce Oswald. I mean, think about this: Mickey hasn't appeared in a videogame, or in any story, for six or eight years. He hasn't been the hero of any story in any medium. And Oswald – he's being reintroduced to the world after 82 years. And where do they both make that comeback? In a videogame. What does that say about where videogames are now as a cultural force?

Pixar is the master of referencing adult themes while keeping hold of the younger audience. Presumably there's an equivalent mechanical challenge in catering for a range of gamers – how do you deal with it?
Well, if you give the player a variety of simple tools to use and a world which has some depth of simulation, that allows emergence. Tools can be used in combination – in interesting ways by each player, individually – combined with a world that's just deeply enough simulated that you can't predict exactly what's going to happen. You know, as soon as you do that, what you discover is, players will figure out their own ways past problems. Now, in the case of *Epic Mickey*, players are figuring out ways to solve problems of their own. I was a little nervous about that, actually, because up until the last month or two, I wasn't seeing a lot of that and going: "Have we done enough here? Are our game systems robust enough to allow players to figure out their own stuff?" And then all of a sudden it was like a dam burst. Early on, there's one spot where we force you to make a choice. It's one of the few explicit choices in the game because it's for training. You can either free a gremlin or you can get a treasure that will make you personally more powerful. And two weeks ago, a player figured out how to get both, which everyone on the team thought was impossible. Win!

It sounds like it was hell to QA.
All my games are hell to QA. Every publisher I've worked for goes: "We have professional QA, we know how to QA games." And I just go: "You don't know how to QA *my* games. *I* know how to QA my games." And then by the end of it, they always go: "Oh, you were right. Yeah."

In digging through the Disney archives, what differences have you noticed between the cartoons of the '30s and how their characters would be drawn by artists working today?
Cartoon characters evolve over time just like anything else. They're literally drawn differently. They have different shapes and different forms and different proportions. They've been simplified over the years. Mickey's eyes used to be just black circles and then for a brief period they became black circles with little pie cutouts. Then by the late '30s he had developed pupils – black eyes and a white pupil. A lot of people look at our version of Mickey and say: "Oh, you went with the old-school Steamboat Willie Mickey," but that's really not the case. There were elements of the old-school Mickey that I really wanted to adopt – I wanted to get the pie eyes, but at game resolution it just looked like a smudge, so I said make them black. Some day we'll do a pie-eyed Mickey. Some day. But we used the basic modern proportions: black eyes, a white mask instead of the fleshtone mask that Mickey has now, and started with the very thin limbs without joins for arms and legs. That's how it was for the first six years or longer of Mickey's existence. They called it the 'rubber hose' Mickey. But we sort of fleshed him out a little bit, we made him a little bit bigger so he looked a little more substantial. Our version of Mickey is unique – he's the videogame Mickey.

Has the perception of those early cartoons changed? Something that looked cute to an audience in the '30s may now have a different kind of quality – kooky or quaint – in the same way that vintage dolls and puppets do.
I can't honestly say I've thought about that much. Disney asked if I wanted to make a game about a world of forgotten and rejected characters and I saw an opportunity there to remind a modern audience of Disney's rich history. And so whether people think it's creepy or cute is less important to me than whether they find it intriguing. I want them to leave this game thinking: 'I had a great time, and I want to know more about the gremlins, or about Oswald.' Or: 'I know almost everything is drawn from Disney history – I wonder where *that* came from?' And there are probably going to be a lot of people playing this who aren't gamers, who are going to be exposed to the idea of choice and consequence in games for the first time. It's all part of my cunning plan.







WAR PORN

THE MILITARY SHOOTER IS THE MOST POPULAR GENRE IN GAMING, BUT HOW ARE ITS COMPROMISES AFFECTING OUR PERCEPTION OF WHAT IT SETS OUT TO SIMULATE?

The glamorisation of battle is hardly a new enterprise. Crude charcoal daubs on cave walls suggest that early man was just as enthralled by violence as he is today. The Iliad, an epic poem whose origins pre-date literacy, is an action spectacle. It bemoans suffering and needless bloodshed while revelling in it, describing with palpable awe the exchange of blows between heroes. A mere 3,200 years later, and Gearbox Software's garrulous president, **Randy Pitchford**, is demonstrating the latest *Band Of Brothers* game. Military advisor Colonel John Antel (retired) stands at the other end of the room, barking at cowed journalists about the game's authenticity, its veneration of the sacrifice made by Our Boys during World War II. Pitchford interrupts, yelping with delight: "Oh my god! Did you see that guy's head explode?" A decapitated Nazi cartwheels in slow motion across the screen next to him.

So, nothing's changed. Or has it? Certainly it's no surprise that violence has a big part to play in videogames. It has similar prominence in every medium, but videogames' attachment to guns has a particular convenience – there is no easier way to create high drama in a medium governed by pointing and clicking. Games have grown more sophisticated, but the association of gunshots with mouseclicks is now indelible, the genres that this interaction supports having grown to produce the defining franchises within the medium. And this convenience has worked in the other direction, too, encouraging

players to see virtual death as a simple process divorced from consequence, combatants as little more than bots, potential scores to be tallied.

The question is, of course: what effect does this have on the real world? Videogames, which have long been the source of moral outrage, have yet to turn us into mindless killers – this much is clear. But the connection between wargames and war is very real indeed. To see that this is true, we need only to look at the dialogue between game creators and the military, which is increasingly keen to use commercially developed technology both in training and recruitment. **James Der Derian**, a research professor at Rhode Island's Brown University, maps in great detail the evolving relationship between entertainment companies and the military in his book, Virtual War.

"Before electronic representation, the earliest wargames were obviously played out on sand with little toy soldiers," he observes. "The biggest leap took place with computerisation. It's interesting how this can be traced to specific individuals, like Ray Macedonia. He was one of the first computerised wargamers in the Pentagon and, in fact, it was his son Mike Macedonia who helped reverse the flow, moving away from these massive internally developed wargames and towards the off-the-shelf movement, going to game developers for the latest technological innovation."

GIS IN VIETNAM TOOK HALLUCINOGENS TO MAKE COMBAT LESS REAL. NOW THE JARHEADS ARE GIVEN GEARS OF WAR

Among the titles to arise from this initiative are *America's Army* and *Full Spectrum Warrior* – games keen to emphasise tactics used in the field, and tied directly into the recruitment and training efforts of the military. Since then, the military's shadow over the retail market has only grown longer, with *Call Of Duty* tournaments becoming a staple of recruitment fairs, and even a game with such a tangential relationship to the real world as *Gears Of War* having been reported to have boosted enlistment in the armed forces. When the third game's writer, and military novelist, Karen Traviss visited Iraq, she found that the US army encampments resounded with the sound of Lancers.

Der Derian: "In some of the earliest marketing for videogames associated with the Iraq war or Afghanistan, they would have a multiplayer game being shown and then they would cut to guys under a camouflage net playing the game while clearly on a forward operating base in Afghanistan. So that line between the representation and execution of warfare has once again been heavily blurred by technology."

The photographer Richard Mosse has also made the connection. His videos of bored US soldiers in one of Saddam Hussein's deserted hilltop palaces is full of eerie inaction quite distinct from the constant mayhem seen in gaming. And yet, in another video shot at Walter Reed Veterans Hospital, amputees and other wounded soldiers compete in a rowdy *Call Of Duty* tournament. Mosse intercuts footage from the plasma displays with actual war footage from the conflict. It acknowledges, if unsubtly, that videogames are part of a movement which fetishises extreme violence while abstracting us from it. GIs in Vietnam took hallucinogens to make combat less real. Now the jarheads are given *Gears Of War*.



James Der Derian, Brown University





Mark Dust, US combat veteran



Greg Goodrich, executive producer, *Medal Of Honor*

Even in the remote Korengal valley in Afghanistan, the 2007 occupation of which is now the subject of the documentary Restrepo, US troops killed time with PlayStations in the midst of a 25 per cent casualty rate. It seems strange to civilians, perhaps, that soldiers would quell the horror of their situation by playing a videogame that attempts to emulate it.

"It's a great escape," says **Mark Dust**, a combat veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom who has since become a neurocognitive sciences PhD student (read his blog at ramblingsontrauma.com). "You play GI Joe all day. You don't have anything better to do after you get off work, except go to the bar and get in trouble or go back to your room and play videogames."

He then makes a point that comes up time and again during the research of this article: "Most of these kids are 18 to 20 years old, and that's what they've grown up on. That's their way of blowing off steam."

Call Of Duty might be the biggest entertainment launch in history, but there are plenty of people who haven't played it. By contrast, in the forces, military shooters are ubiquitous. And for many within the new generation of recruits, such games constitute their first introduction to the concept of war. Is it good preparation? Although Dust hasn't played military shooters since leaving the army suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, he doesn't denounce them: "Frankly, once you do it for real, it isn't nearly as much fun to do it simulated." He recognises wargames as the entertainment medium of the day, and sees in them useful simulation elements.

"I was in the infantry," he explains. "It might be that we identified more with those [realistic wargames], rather than *Zelda*, because that's what we joined the infantry to do: running round, kicking in doors and shooting

To its credit, *Call Of Duty 4* acknowledges dubious tactics – with the SAS interrogating and executing a prisoner – but it doesn't seem troubled by them

people. If you take a little bit of your training of how to assault a building, or clear a trench or take out a bunker, and use them in a game situation, you get to practise the techniques without actually shooting somebody."

Other soldiers we talk to agree. "They're very useful in seeing how some things work," says a lance corporal in a British tank regiment. "When in a firefight we're always told to put down as much lead as possible and then get people to move round the side. All that stuff comes out in videogames. That said, there's nothing about the six months of sitting in some hellhole, eating crap and doing mundane tasks. But it's not fair to ask games to do that, because you wouldn't buy it. I wouldn't buy it."

Although his respect is largely reserved for the more simulatory titles like the *Operation Flashpoint* and *ARMA* series, he points out that even the mainstream games pay lip service to credible tactics. The latest *Medal Of Honor* perhaps advances that line of gung-ho militarism towards reality, with an insistence on covering fire and its emphasis on the importance of the squad. In EA's FPS you avoid bunching together, keep the angles covered and stay off the skyline.

Nonetheless, both the lance corporal and Dust acknowledge that there is a vast disparity between these games and reality. Even if they managed to describe army rigmarole and tactical action with purest accuracy, there are yet more troubling ways in which they misrepresent war and its principal product: death.

"When you kill someone [in a game] you don't have to see how that family mourns that death, or all the collateral damage that takes place," says Der Derian. "All the unforeseen and unintended consequences of warfare – those are usually not part of a videogame involving contemporary conflict. There have been some efforts to add to the reality factor, to enhance the fidelity, but in general that's missing – that whole context of warfare, that tragic context."

As the lance corporal says: "When someone you actually know gets killed it brings it all home very quickly."



Full Spectrum Warrior **(above) and *America's Army* (below) represented landmarks of sorts as videogames that made use of military funding**

The degree to which this distorted, abbreviated depiction of warfare affects troops is untold, and a matter of debate among those we speak to. Most say that, as with the suggestion that *GTA* would turn us all into psychopathic car thieves, soldiers can tell the difference between artifice and reality. There is little risk of confusion. And yet *GTA* is not used to train anyone, or recruit them to a cause which is nominally depicted within the game. If games are effective at reinforcing good operating procedure, then we wonder if we are really that adept at selecting and discarding those actions which we recognise to be false or unhelpful.

"In a videogame situation everything coming at you is a foe and you just shoot it regardless," says Dust. "You don't have to make the decisions of whether it's friend or foe. Very rarely do your AI partners go in another direction and pop out where you're not expecting them to be."

Medal Of Honor references a friendly fire incident through a cutscene, but this is as close as we've come to seeing a mainstream game tackle what is clearly a serious problem, and one which has existed throughout the history of armed conflict. Nor does the game see the marines interact with civilians, or the horror of collateral damage. Does videogaming, in its saleable blend of escapism and simulation, simply create a revenge fantasy, devoid of repercussion? And, if so, what would be wrong with that?

"It comes down to the individual," says the lance corporal, "but I can't imagine someone playing *Call Of Duty*, then going on an operation and killing a bunch of civilians just because they are all wearing similar clothes to the enemy."

And yet, he admits, the distinction between games and the reality of war becomes trickier when battles are fought remotely. With the use of drones, high-altitude support and the infrared vision systems of Apache gunships, war is being ever more virtualised – co-opting videogame trappings and control schemes in the process. Defence contractor Raytheon hired game developers to design its drone operation (its 'synthetic environment' is powered by an Xbox processor), while iRobot's XM1216 Small Unmanned Ground Vehicle is controlled by a gamepad. The pilots for these craft are usually in the US – Washington, Texas and Nevada. They have breakfast with their families, see their children to school, sit down for a few hours of intense combat operations, then clock off to go home.

While such methods have a proven record in reducing frontline casualties, there are fears that the distance from combat may also make

their operators more blasé about their actions. Certainly this is an accusation vigorously denied by the military, which points to its stringent procedures before clearing drones to fire. It's clear that many drone operations are conducted with great care and discrimination, but things do go wrong: in May, a military investigation blamed the deaths of 23 Afghan civilians on the "inaccurate and unprofessional" reporting of Predator operators based in Nevada.

Behind all of this is the chill spectre of the leaked video footage of an Apache gunship which formed part of the WikiLeaks scandal earlier this year. The disturbing sequence shows an Apache crew blithely gunning down two journalists, having mistaken a camera for a weapon, and later, while riddling a vehicle with bullets, wounding two children inside.

Anyone who has played the similar sections in *Modern Warfare* and *Battlefield: Bad Company 2* will recognise that these games emulate everything but the difficulty and consequences of making these mortal decisions at a distance. Perhaps more disturbing is the familiarity of it all. Developers have looked to TV news coverage in order to authenticate their own versions of war, creating an exchange of images between their frivolous digital carnage and the desperate sensationalism of 24-hour rolling reports that sends the depiction of conflict into a spiral of exaggeration and voyeurism. In the world of war porn, videogames are the Readers' Wives.


Asi Burak, co-president, Games For Change


Peter Tamte, president, Atomic Games

THESE ARE WARS IN WHICH TROOPS DON'T MAKE BAD DECISIONS, AND INNOCENT PEOPLE DON'T GET KILLED THROUGH NEGLIGENCE

"Commercial videogames show some of the elements of combat that might prepare somebody for knowing the structure of war, but I don't know if an artificial environment where there's no consequences can deliver an ethical understanding." So says Dr **Albert Rizzo**, co-director of the Virtual Reality, Psychology and Social Neuroscience Lab at the University of Southern California, where he works alongside the military to develop simulations to be used in PTSD treatment. "But the military are trying to [enforce ethical concerns] with cultural sensitivity training. I think they've recognised that with a digital generation of recruits you're going to get a little bit more awareness of a combat environment, but some of that may not be accurate or useful for accomplishing the mission or survival. The balance to that stuff is to build a response to others in your group – to protect your team. I think that taps into a deeper survival instinct than playing 1,000 hours of *Call Of Duty*."

Rizzo also points out that even among drone operators, psychological damage has been reported – an indication that distance hasn't wholly allayed their understanding of ethical responsibility. Perhaps the military is

GENERATION GAME

PETER TAMTE, PRESIDENT OF ATOMIC GAMES, DISCUSSES THE HOT POTATO THAT IS WARGAME SIX DAYS IN FALLUJAH

Does *Six Days In Fallujah* feature complexities such as the difficulty involved in distinguishing between civilian and enemy targets?
Definitely. Those things are a part of the *Six Days* plan. I should answer the question more broadly. The premise for the whole experience is actually experiencing the true stories of marines as they fought. Those stories certainly ranged in complexity – the marines struggled with a lot of challenges personally as well as tactically, and we were definitely trying to incorporate that. There were situations that I knew of where marines unintentionally hurt people, and the marines had to be removed because they were combat ineffective afterwards. They refused to throw frag grenades into a room before going into it, because it was a traumatic thing to have hurt civilians. There's something deep inside these people that makes them want to serve. I'm not saying that for everybody – people join the military for a variety of different reasons – but a lot of the guys I talk to, they felt called to it, a need to protect innocent people. If they hurt one of those people, it violates who they are, their identity.

What have been the reactions to the game from servicemen?
Overwhelmingly positive. At this point I've spoken to hundreds of marines – I'm not saying there aren't marines out there who are opposed to it, but I certainly haven't spoken to them. *Six Days* was conceived by marines who had just fought in Fallujah, and was created with the help of dozens of these marines. Videogames are what these guys have grown up with, and they're anxious to let people know about their experiences over there, to help people understand better the activities of the Iraq war.

Are videogames the right medium for this? You look at an FPS and then at TV series Generation Kill, and there is a vast gulf in complexity.
Yep, that's absolutely true, but it's a different thing we can do, right? I may not be able to experience the rich characterisation and emotional nuance that comes with a film, but I can experience an understanding from actually doing these things myself. When it's me who is faced with having to choose between two bad options, I get a level of understanding that marines face in combat that I would not get by watching someone else make that decision.

And yet shooters have historically been not very good at presenting complex or interesting decisions.
That's an opportunity for *Six Days*! I would be misrepresenting what we were trying to do if I said we were taking on those broad, almost academic questions about war – but what we can do is at the tactical level in the choice that players have to make. One of my biggest complaints about videogames right now is that you don't even have the tactical tools that these guys have in real life. Most of these games that I play take place in environments that are static. They don't change – or they do change, but they change based on the script and not on the player's actions. And that's just not the way it is.



right – operating a drone isn't considered a videogame; the majority of pilots and gunners do their duty with great care and gravity. Perhaps these relatively rare tragedies are simply the real cost of war. But you wouldn't know it from videogames.

The effect this powerful entertainment medium has on the way soldiers actually fight is uncertain, but a more evident disservice is to be found in the censored message these games deliver to the public at large. These are wars in which the west is righteous, or its righteousness is made irrelevant. These are wars in which troops don't make bad decisions, and innocent people don't get killed through negligence, willful malevolence or even simple accident. Often, these are wars fought by decent, upstanding, square-jawed heroes against animalistic subhumans that swarm like bees out of their dishevelled, makeshift dwellings.

"It's not even a matter of violence – they affect us in terms of perception, in terms of the shallowness," says **Asi Burak**, co-president of Games For Change and designer of *PeaceMaker*, a game adapted by the US Army War College to be played by its officers and generals (see **E**214). "It's more in the sense of stereotypes. Because they don't want to be political it's even worse: they just use a generic Arab, and even sometimes fictional countries. There is the generic Arab enemy, there is the generic eastern European enemy, then sometimes there is the South American gang member. [The developers] don't think about it and it's something we don't even question ourselves – this idea that the good guys can talk and make plans and choices, and then there are hordes of enemies who have no name and they're just noisy and stop you from finishing a level."

But if you ever attempt to criticise meaning, you quickly come across a near-ubiquitous PR defence that dismisses awkward questions as trivial and champions raw mechanics. "It's just a game," they say. It's a seductive argument. Many games we value for their mechanics only – *Super Mario*









***Six Days In Fallujah*'s destructible scenery recreates the tactics which saw marines blast through buildings rather than stray into the streets**

Modern Warfare 2's notorious No Russian mission is only there to establish a bogeyman, but is as close as the series has come to the cost of war for civilians



Galaxy's kidnapped Princess paradigm is an irrelevance, and in many cases you tolerate clumsy stories for the action beneath. Yet it is impossible not to have a dual appreciation – particularly with wargames that do so much to create an authentic setting, and lay claim to using narrative techniques to venerate the soldiers. Our enjoyment of these games may rest upon mechanics that you can identify in abstraction, but these are not abstract experiences.

"It's just a game" is an infantilising, self-effacing line to take for the dominant form of electronic entertainment on the planet, and yet many games consciously attempt to divorce themselves of the politics of the situation, becoming propaganda by omission. In an attempt to merit the approval of the troops, *Medal Of Honor* backs away from describing anything outside of a sanitised version of the soldier's immediate experience. Original plans to re-enact Operation Anaconda, a 2002 anti-Taliban operation, were shelved when the game's military advisers baulked at the idea of so closely recreating events.

When we ask the game's executive producer **Greg Goodridge** about the larger picture, the effect that the depiction of war here might have, he looks pained. "The game is not about war," he says. "It's just not. I don't care why they're there, the politics or the debate. But they're there. So let's support them, let's get behind them."

Goodridge emphasises that the story his team wants to tell is one of brotherhood. "It's about the love for the brother behind you, not hate for the enemy." This claim is supported by the game, which makes much of each squad's camaraderie and the overall professionalism of the forces on the ground. But where are the games that do more than that? As Burak complains, it's not even these games' depoliticised, shallow depiction of war that is objectionable – it's that it's the only game in town. "If there was more diversity, and people were seeing more aspects of war, then I would be more comfortable," Burak says. "It's not about eradicating that expression, it's about having more expression. Most of the choices we make right now in a wargame are very tactical and very operational. I would like to see more ethical choices, more moral choices that are related to citizens, more negotiation. War also has conflict resolution aspects to it that are never covered. We need, and want, to see different aspects of war, because the decisions you have to make in the current games don't have consequences – and consequences are the great thing about games, right?"

"IF THERE WAS MORE DIVERSITY, AND WE WERE SEEING MORE ASPECTS OF WAR, THEN I WOULD BE MORE COMFORTABLE"

It is an irony, then, that *Medal Of Honor* spectacularly failed to avoid controversy, and was withdrawn from army outlets when details of its multiplayer mode came to light. As with most team modes, the game's two sides oppose each other, one designated as Allied forces, the other as Taliban – and in this competitive multiplayer context, *MOH*'s developers assumed that everyone would understand that the team names are as arbitrary as red versus blue. It's just a game, after all. "They didn't even present it from the perspective of the Taliban," says Burak, exasperated. "There is nothing really political about it – I almost wish there was!"

The furore resulted in a volte-face, with the Taliban's name being stripped from the multiplayer component of the game. It's undeniably a mode that favours mechanics over meaning, and the frivolous nature of multiplayer makes the Taliban's presence harder to defend and its removal a trivial matter. Nonetheless, by caving to pressure, its publisher EA has seemingly waived its right to free speech – and in doing so made it much harder for future developers to tackle the representation of the Taliban in a more conscientious way.

Yet even *Medal* Of Honor marks a small change in the degree to which games address political issues, daring to take swings at Washington for the mismanagement of the war effort. But further progress is likely to be slow.

"It's easier to keep making the same things that are successful," says Burak. "It's very tough to be a games studio; it's such a risky endeavour, such a costly effort to try harder and to try to be more sophisticated. It's easier to think: this works, people buy it, so why not make more of it?"

It's also a matter of technology. One game which, according to its developers, refuses to shy away from the realities of conflict, with all its difficult decisions and tragic consequences, is *Six Days In Fallujah*. President of its developer Atomic Games, **Peter Tamte**, is adamant that there is a will to improve among developers making wargames, and to tackle thorny issues. "Our struggle isn't a matter of sugarcoating it," he says. "The marines we spoke to had very specific situations about interacting with civilians that they related to us for the purpose of including them in the game. But there's a ton of complexity from having non-combatants in a game when most of the AI is created for combat. The question isn't, creatively, whether we want to have civilians, it's how we do that well. But we can figure that out."



Albert Rizzo, University of Southern California

STRESS TEST

"My work [involves] using virtual Iraq and virtual Afghanistan as an exposure therapy tool for treating PTSD," explains Albert Rizzo. "Games have done the full circle, going from recruiting kids into the military, to using games as a training mechanism, to using this technology to fly drones, to dealing with the guilt and horror and the nightmares. A digital generation of soldiers are more likely to seek treatment in this form because they're already familiar with it; it might take the heat off one-on-one 'Tell me about your mother…' therapy."

Although exposure therapy has been used for some time to treat PTSD – Rizzo tells that us simulations were used to re-enact the World Trade Center attack – it remains contentious. Mark Dust opposes it, preferring forms of treatment that deal directly with the physiological effects of trauma.



More sober than most, *Medal Of Honor* still has thrilling quadbikes and swarming enemies. There are no civilians, so you can be trigger happy





Although *Six Days* is a promising sign that some developers are eager to deal with the gamut of war experiences with some maturity, it has yet to find a publisher after it was dropped by Konami amid an outcry of "too soon". As EA's Goodridge also says, with some considerable chagrin, "People hear 'game' and they think: 'Whee!' They don't think: 'Wow!'"

"It's a trust thing, right?" says Tamte. "There's an assumption that the word 'game' means fun or triviality. A journalist once asked [one of the consulting marines] if *Six Days* could be fun. And the marine answered: 'There's no one emotion to describe combat. There's a whole range of emotions to describe combat'. So that's the way I have to express our objective – to take players through that full range of emotions."

As for the controversy of depicting a current conflict, Tamte is impassioned: the reflection of our time in the media of our time is not only an inevitable thing, it's an essential thing.

"I look at our responsibility now as the responsibility that music has played, that radio has played, that the films that showed during WWII in the theatres played, that film during the Vietnam war played, that TV during Vietnam played. Even MASH, for example. It may have been set in Korea, but it was about Vietnam and during the Vietnam war. It dealt with very real topics that helped people shape their understanding of the situation so that people could make better decisions. That's my challenge for the people who say that *Six Days* is too early. I have to say no, it's the opposite of that. What is the point 20 years from now? We have to inform people while these events are evolving. It doesn't have to be an editorial about whether the war is good or bad; it's just a matter of giving people information and so they can make a decision themselves. It is our responsibility. Videogames are the medium of our generation. And it's our responsibility to use that medium to deal with relevant topics."

But is the medium up to it?

"The question's absolutely valid," says Tamte. "I think we're taking the first steps; we're walking on egg shells. And we're going to break a few along the way, but over time we're going to work out what we can and can't do."

A developer that claims to have tried to make a different kind of wargame lost its publisher after a shrill, uninformed internet outcry. EA, the second biggest thirdparty publisher on the planet, blinked in the face of criticism from the same old moral guardians, and showed just how shallow *MOH*'s world is. The smartest games, like *BioShock*, abscond to theorising about political systems in fantasy wonderlands, or like *Operation Flashpoint* dwell in wars that are safely make-believe. None of them look the world in the eye and say what they see. Games, and wargames more so than any other, are of our time. Perhaps one day they'll start living up to that responsibility.



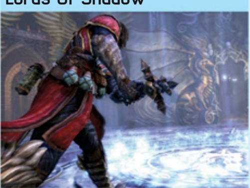
Review

New games assessed in words and numbers



Edge's most played

Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow



Halloween with the Belmonts was quite a treat. The combat cross was wielded, stakes were driven, holy water was spilled, and chandeliers were swung upon.
360, PS3, KONAMI

Bayonetta



Vanquish sent us boosting back to Platinum's deliriously camp high point. Even without the stellar combat, that Fly Me To The Moon remix would deserve another listen.
360, PS3, CAPCOM

Deadly Premonition



The weird world of scares, seeds and silliness beckons with its fishing side-quests and part-time jobs. As atmospheric as it is schlocky. Did you hear that, Zach?
360, RISING STAR GAMES

Out of your hands

Who's to blame for poor calibration?



Has your avatar thrown a fit? Is it standing inert, insensible to your flailing arms? Did it just jump instead of duck? And, more to the point, what the hell can you do about it? Clearly, you need to get a new living room

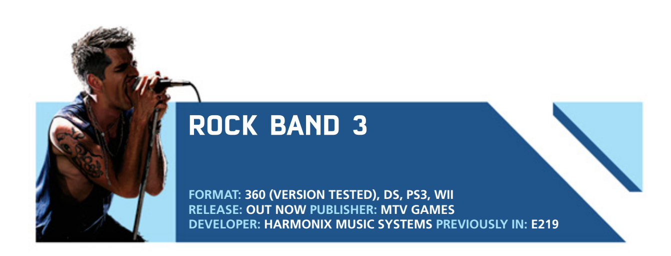
Allow us to take you into our world. The **Edge** demo room sits in the bowels of our building, near the Earth's core, where it's still warm. It's the sort of place *Metroid*'s Ridley might nest. Half-dismantled speakers, defunct consoles and cobwebbed PC cases jut like gravestones from tangles of wires. It seems to have its own climate down there. Nonetheless, the demo room offers generous conditions – a spacious, well-lit area of around six feet between the TV and a large, unadorned wall to calibrate and use Kinect or Move against (putting aside the risk of stumbling into a teetering pile of neglected GameCubes). And yet, while playing *The Fight*, the game periodically chides you that head-tracking is registering poorly. Well, you think, whose fault is that?

Short of buying a new house, it's hard to see what consumers can really do about this. It's also hard to apportion responsibility between hardware and software. We've played Move games which have had no great problems tracking our movements. It may be that the best games opt to be less ambitious in the subtlety of gestures required; our issue with something like *Kung Fu Rider* is that it overloads the tech with a large number of essentially similar gestures. But our problems with *The Fight* are more basic: despite frequent recalibration, it can simply fail to marry even the most basic movements to the action onscreen.

Kinect's manual, meanwhile, recommends some stringent and unlikely conditions. Though it does get confused by extra people in the frame, its major advantage over Move is its self-correcting ability – we're yet to confuse it to the point at which it hasn't recovered, by re-tilting the sensor automatically if necessary. The big problem we've noticed with Kinect, however, is the need for space. Perhaps it's time we knocked through that wall…

Terrific technology lies behind both of these systems, and yet you wonder whether Nintendo has outmanoeuvred its competitors again by going lo-fi. Its crude sensor bar won't throw a strop about your lighting conditions, works in nearly all living-room sizes, and won't get confused if your dog decides to join in. Under perfect conditions it's wholly outclassed by Move and Kinect – but then, nobody lives in the houses from the adverts, do they?

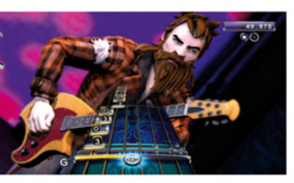
Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three,
4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven,
8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



ROCK BAND 3

FORMAT: **360 (VERSION TESTED), DS, PS3, WII**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW** PUBLISHER: **MTV GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **HARMONIX MUSIC SYSTEMS** PREVIOUSLY IN: **E219**









Harmonix's promise of more DLC is kept by an absolute zinger: 12 tracks by The Doors. Only three will feature Pro support, sadly, but it's hard to complain when Light My Fire's among them

Harmonix's journey towards its masterpiece has been one of many highways, each a turn towards the ultimate synthesis of music and videogames. This latest has become known as 'the one that actually teaches you to play instruments', but in truth they all are. Even *Frequency*, which turned the PlayStation pad into a kind of Eno-esque navigator of obscure electronica, is as valid a tutor as this game. The obstacles feel just as tall, the need to climb them as strong. The only difference is that the rewards are so much greater.

Rock Band 3's flagship, the Pro Guitar, is an unqualified triumph. Though the true hybrid, the Squier, won't be out until next year, the current version, with its button-based fret board and phoney 'strings', makes an ideal stand-in. It's durable, desirable, tactile and precise. The buttons pivot just right to let the finger slide across them, coming as close to steel wire as buttons can. There'll be breakages, of course, and justified hissy fits from the victims, but our Pro experience has been 100 per cent positive.

Our best-case scenario for Pro was that the guitar – and we'll talk about the keyboard in a moment – would be a hard but effective taskmaster with its own set of rules, sitting comfortably in a vacuum between games and actual musicianship. A bridge, in other words, as suggested in **E**219. It's defied our imagination.

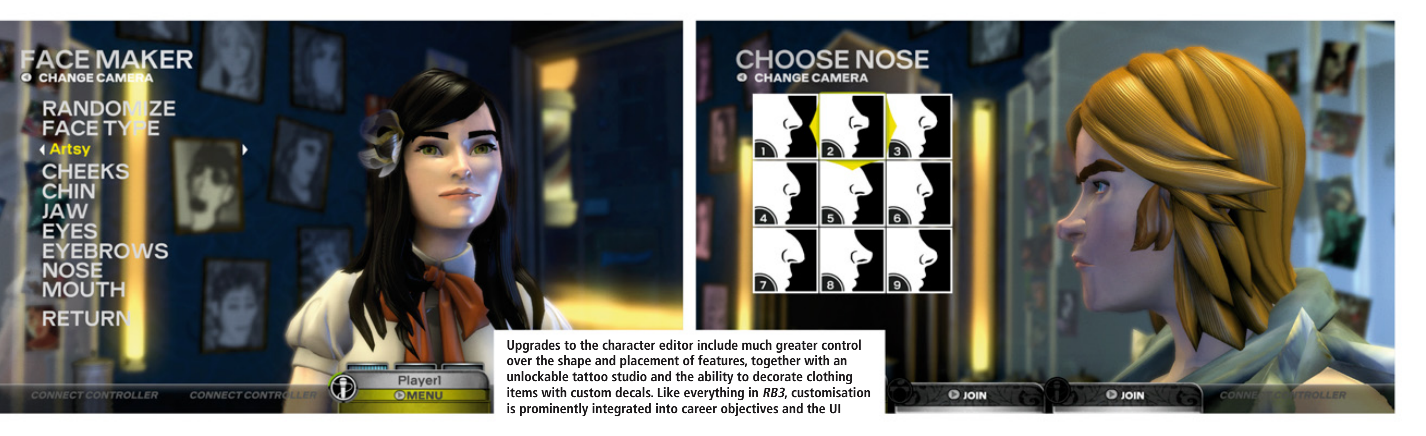
Every aspect of the game is as playable with the 'classic' controller as any previous *Rock Band*. But to those willing to brave the fire, the Pro guitar makes it redundant. Sure, this initial Mustang version is still one step removed from the real thing, but to those starting out it makes no difference. Hour by hour, step by challenging step, it strips away the alienation of the instrument, the stigma of those five coloured buttons, and any lingering doubts of its worth as a videogame device. It's surely no coincidence that the first track in the tutorial, The Hardest Button To Button, is by the genre's onetime detractor, The White Stripes.



The new Rock Band experience is a complete success. There is simply no aspect of this game that isn't polished to near-perfection

When it comes to the discovery and democratisation of music, the key figures have often been masters of visual mnemonics, able to see the unlikeliest links between images and memory. The Pro mode notation appreciates that learning aids don't have to be obvious. The basic plucking is certainly straightforward: a number indicates where along the fretboard to hold, and comes floating down the relevant string on the highway. Chords, though, are defined as 'shapes' that look completely alien when they first pop into view, and barre chords are different again. Yet these strange symbols speak clearly to some part of your brain or other, because a few hours later you're fluent.

The overlap between learning this and a regular game is remarkable, even when the controller features 102 buttons. That it never feels frustrating despite its obvious fearsomeness speaks to the complete



Upgrades to the character editor include much greater control over the shape and placement of features, together with an unlockable tattoo studio and the ability to decorate clothing items with custom decals. Like everything in *RB3*, customisation is prominently integrated into career objectives and the UI







Displaying both octaves of the keyboard across the highway would be impossible, so a clever use of colour coding, scrolling and visual alerts keeps you up to speed





News from the post-launch frontline: importing tracks from earlier *Rock Band* iterations is relatively straightforward, though the methods vary enough to require the provision of a help page on Harmonix's website. As usual, licensing issues mean either 400 or 800 MS point import fees

success of the new *Rock Band* experience. There is simply no aspect of this game that isn't polished to near-perfection.

Take, for instance, the 'Overshell', the game's new user interface. To call it a frontend would be misleading, since it genuinely envelops the entire play session. Signing in, browsing available characters, choosing a difficulty and joining your bandmates onstage is like dropping a coin into a slot and hitting a big flashing 'start' button. Switching profiles, dropping out and taking control of primary menu navigation are no different. The many dots of modern player management are joined without any one line cutting another. Functions are sometimes barred under specific circumstances, but never without reason.

Just as elegant is the career structure. With all 83 on-disc songs unlocked from the start, Career mode is simply there to add scenery to the learning curve. The game does have another option, Play Now, but they both boil down to the same thing: playing songs, earning fans and unlocking cool stuff. A track chosen on a whim from the Quickplay list can be as profitable as the new Road Challenges, which see your band stumble its way through an often accidental career, your bandmates strutting their stuff on every page of every menu. A shinier band, too, as the game's shaders have been rewritten to add a careful layer of realism, the customisation modes more powerful and extensive.

On to the keyboard, then, of which there's little to say beyond it being a very good facsimile of a low-end model, albeit with just two octaves. The worst you can say is that the Overdrive button seems positioned for its use as a keytar, yet Harmonix itself – and indeed the game – seems to baulk at the idea. Your characters don't play keytar on stage, no one does so unironically in reality, and there's room above the keys for a more natural placement. As it is, hitting the leftward arm of the instrument takes some getting used to.

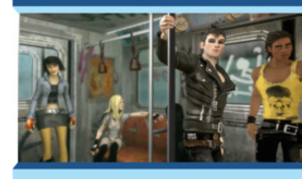
When it comes to the instruments generally, you could also argue that, much like *The Beatles: Rock Band*, *RB3* can sometimes feel like a victim of its

Continued



With such an extensive back catalogue, patchy Pro support was always going to be a persistent niggle. There's little word from Harmonix yet as to what will happen and when, but some degree of retrofitting seems inevitable

The power of love



The distinction stands: where *Guitar Hero* feels like rock seen through a television, filtered through parody and stereotype, *Rock Band* views it from the stage, the garage and everywhere in between. It isn't just passion that drives this game's art style but knowledge, the career mode a kind of Hitchhiker's Guide To Touring that gives every sound effect and option a character of its own. With much carried over from *Rock Band 2*, the venue rotation is even more eclectic, zipping between promo video recording sessions, festivals, arenas and the kookiest and smokiest of clubs. Yet it's the intermissions that really shine, those intimate moments on the road that cunningly disguise loading sequences.

It's a shame that Pro keyboard mode doesn't feature as exhaustive a tutorial as the guitar, though understandable given its intuitive nature. The one thing the game can't properly teach is hand placement, and it'll be fascinating to see how players evolve

songs. The keyboard is just one of those instruments that tends to either dominate or fade, hogging almost two minutes of Bohemian Rhapsody but reduced to mere bips and bops elsewhere. This might grate for a solo player already picking favourites from 'just' 83 songs, finding themselves staring at a blank highway. But we defy you to find a smarter tracklist than this one, *DJ Hero*'s included. It's accessible, it's cultured, and it isn't afraid to pick from the carcasses of recent *Guitar Hero* games.

It all adds up to what is easily the best and most progressive rhythm-action game ever made, if that label even applies any more. It doesn't, really. Ever since the MTV acquisition and the rebranding, Harmonix has been quite loudly assembling *Rock Band* as a platform, dropping the Rock Band Network late into *Rock Band 2* – and the importance of that is its own story – bolstering the *Rock Band* store to over 2,000 tracks, doing its best to import old on-disc content into each instalment, and welcoming suggestions for region-specific tunes and more exotic UGC. *Rock Band 3* connects those pieces in quite spectacular fashion.



A world of plastic instruments is out there, and RB3 does its utmost to connect them all, whichever franchise they're from

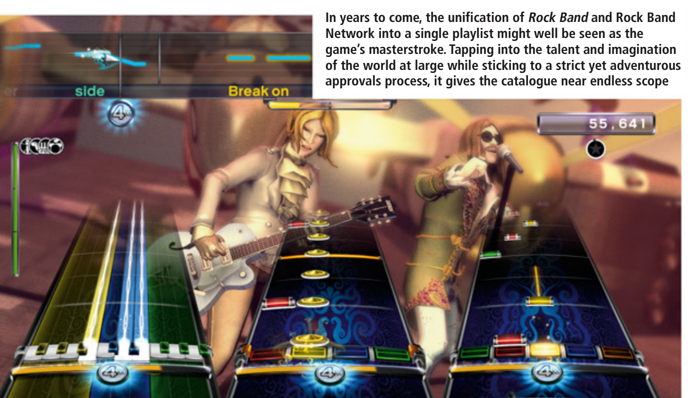
In the time we've spent with this game, we've played over a hundred tracks from the *Rock Band* store and marvelled at how so many – Under The Bridge and The Pretender leap to mind – play even better than those on the disc. It's a new collection



for a new kind of enjoyment, and Harmonix has respected that investment despite any and all distractions.

Much the same goes for multiplayer. You've bought the instruments, you've bought the batteries, and you're now being sold even more. A world of plastic instruments is out there, and *RB3* does its utmost to connect them all, whichever franchise they're from, wherever they might be. Social networking extensions; custom setlist battles coordinated via RockBand.com; profile publishing; offline support for up to seven players, including three-part harmonies from *The Beatles: Rock Band*; seamless, visible leaderboards and metadata for every song – the list goes on.

Harmonix now takes its rightful place alongside all who have championed the gift of music, not to mention those who have, just as importantly, kept it in step with technology. Chief among them is the studio's owner, MTV, whose patience in that role is too easily overlooked. Amid dreadful misadventures into non-music dross and increasingly antiseptic playlists, *Rock Band 3* is by far the most profound development in that company's recent history. For the rest of us, it is simply magnificent. **[10]**

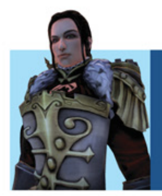


In years to come, the unification of *Rock Band* and Rock Band Network into a single playlist might well be seen as the game's masterstroke. Tapping into the talent and imagination of the world at large while sticking to a strict yet adventurous approvals process, it gives the catalogue near endless scope






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FABLE III

FORMAT: **360** RELEASE: **OUT NOW**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT** DEVELOPER: **LIONHEAD**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E203, E212, E214**



Health now recharges and the slow-time spell has become a potion. It no longer has the secondary effect of allowing you to warp-dash in a given direction, either







Lionhead has purged the HUD almost altogether. Context-sensitive commands appear onscreen for just a moment before the ability to summon them vanishes. It's clean, but not always useful – you may want to know if you have friendly fire switched on, for example

The Industrial Age has arrived in Albion. The throne you won in *Fable II* is now occupied by a son, who has since proved himself a tyrant. Player control, meanwhile, has been inherited by the louche younger sibling. Galvanised by a betrayal, the prince or princess sees the elder brother's reign for what it is, flees the castle, and sets about fomenting rebellion.

The quests by which you secure support for your coup take us into familiar *Fable* territory – an RPG-lite mix of farce and fighting in a series of sprawling, bucolic environments that run the length of Albion. It feels streamlined: even the side-quests tie back into your overall progress, since proving yourself to powermongers will often involve satisfying the bizarre needs of the local people. So it is that you see off balverine threats, chaperone traders through bandit country, re-enact long-lost plays, unleash a plague of gnomes, break up marriages, steal celebrity underpants and dress up as a chicken to lure errant poultry back to roost. *Fable* still delights in its eccentric mishmash of British humour, from the affectionately quaint slapstick, punning and Pythonesque non-sequiturs to moments that revel in darkness and irony.

Boil off the script, however, and you're not left with an awful lot besides fighting. Missions involve getting somewhere, pressing A and then going back. Sometimes you can choose to press B instead, if you're feeling a bit naughty – an option outlined with a flaming ring, were you unsure that murdering hippies is considered bad form. There's more to be said about the shortcomings of Lionhead's moral choices later, but strictly in terms of quest interaction, there's simply not a great deal going on.



Fable III largely gets away with it through sheer charm, through the infectious sense of fun in its detail, as you trace the trail of a serial-insulter, stumble into a parody of pen-and-paper RPGs or hunt for a malevolent gnome, shouting jibes at you from the rafters of a building. At all points, the comedy is bolstered by voice-acting of considerable panache, old hands like John Cleese and Stephen Fry effortlessly proving their adept comic timing. But such non-interactive trimmings can only go so far: because combat has been stripped of depth, the game has a tougher time keeping your attention. If you played *Fable II* as a button masher, or with little interest in magic, then you may hardly notice – but for our personal fighting style it's gutting. *Fable II* allowed you to stack spells on one button, powering up different attacks the longer you held it down. It made you think tactically, with early activated spells buying you time to reposition or charge up powerful attacks. Now you can equip just one magic attack (albeit one combined from two spells, later in the game). Mastery of *Fable II*'s combat meant elegant, elaborate dances in which you could avoid taking a single blow. It made you feel heroic. Now, the best method is to unleash shockwave spell after shockwave spell until everyone falls over. It makes you feel cheap.

The game is still generous with its distractions. Hidden caskets of loot and uncharted caves beckon you from the beaten path; houses and businesses can be bought, rents changed and tenants evicted; ladies can



The foul-mouthed Gnome collectibles – *Fable III*'s gargoyle equivalents – provide the biggest laughs in the game







Houses now deteriorate, and tenants may refuse to pay up as a result, forcing more micromanagement. The minigames – among them the chortlingly titled Lute Hero – are still dull, and as necessary as ever if you want to save your kingdom

There aren't many boss battles outside of the main storyline, and even then there's little in the way of mechanical escalation as a quest progresses: most end in a showdown which throws extra waves of dumb bad guys at you





be wooed, married and impregnated; hats can be purchased and donned. Few of these activities, though unfailingly pleasant, are more elaborate than they were in *Fable II*; if anything, the game is more insistent that you get on with things rather than dally about trying on different frocks (and *Fable III*'s range pour homme is a little disappointing – we recommend cross-dressing).

Along the main questline you make promises to various faction leaders who join your insurrection, and later decide whether to keep them or not. Ironically, the degree of your freedom in this was exaggerated in previews – these promises are necessary to make any progress at all. Some are even made automatically. It's not the only thing that doesn't match up with expectation. One much-trumpeted sequence in which you choose to leave a friend to die or drag him the length of a desert simply doesn't have the promised consequences – your decision is made irrelevant by the following cutscene. We apologise for reporting it as described to us by Lionhead staff. When will we learn?

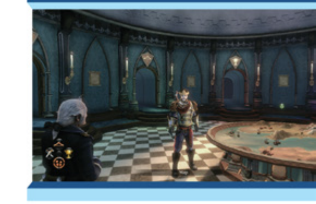
These promises become painfully significant in the game's second half. Having ousted your brother, the business of running a kingdom turns out to be trickier than you imagined. It's an enticing concept treated with such a honking lack of subtlety that your stake in the fate of the kingdom all but evaporates. Morality has come a long way in games, but Lionhead got as far as *Black & White* and gave up: choices here are false dichotomies framed by pantomime depictions of good and evil. Help a neighbouring nation at huge financial cost, or enslave them? Orphanage or brothel? Since the narrative imposes an impetus to save money, freedom of choice is never really present – it's a tortuous lesson on how tough power is unless you compromise, making the dilemma crude and your intent futile. It's a combination that feels faintly hectoring. True, *Fable* aims for flippancy, and the absurd choices often raise a bleak chuckle. But the game is being flippant with everything you've set out to do for the first six hours. That might be a joke too far.

> There's persistent delight to be had mucking around in Albion, a world imbued with a will to pleasure and an irreverent sense of itself

The execution makes this doubly problematic. In its vaudevillian attempt to sabotage player benevolence, the game breaks its own logic. If you think you can raise the capital required by the plot by snapping up property, beware. With every kingly decision made, the game removes an unpredictable number of days between then and your deadline. We were sitting pretty on our property empire when 100 days vanished in a loading screen. Suddenly, we were a bad king. The choices that we wanted to make, which seemed like logical means to solve the entire problem, never presented themselves.

Despite this, once you laugh off the conclusion of the main questline, there remains a wealth of warmly written sidequests to be hoovered up, secrets to be hunted in every corner, and chickens to be kicked. There's persistent delight to be had mucking around in Albion, and it's difficult to harbour great annoyance for its story's failing when it takes place in a world imbued with such a will to pleasure, and such an irreverent sense of itself. Nonetheless, for all its polish and solid production, its core combat offering is a regression and its showy centrepiece comes apart almost entirely. What lies around and beneath is joyous – but you can't help feeling that it's the basis for something greater than *Fable III*. **[7]**

Cleese of use



Part and parcel of Lionhead's approach to usability is to reject menus in favour of a pretty 3D in-fiction interface, known as the Sanctuary. You can teleport here instantly, and find arrayed in it your various clothes and weapons, along with your butler, played with wry warmth by John Cleese. But hunting out a particular item often involves turfing through your entire selection, and we still have no idea how to find and use the books we've collected. You can peer at a 3D map to set current quests, buy property and fast travel – but it is no quicker than *Fable II*'s menu system. It can take up to 20 seconds to find a quest-giver and fast travel to them. And, while gorgeous, the map isn't terribly useful when it comes to orienteering.





NEED FOR SPEED: HOT PURSUIT

FORMAT: 360, PS3 (VERSION TESTED)
RELEASE: OUT NOW **PUBLISHER:** EA **DEVELOPER:** CRITERION
PREVIOUSLY IN: E216, E221





This is a beautiful game, and Seacrest County moves frequently between mountains, mud tracks and neon tunnels. The best effect is from the cops' lights, and Criterion wastes no opportunity for a tunnel or overhang to show them off

Where do we go next? It's the only question that matters in driving games, and *Need For Speed: Hot Pursuit* has a brilliant answer, every time you ask: Autolog. This is *HP*'s beating heart, and an innovation destined to be shamelessly cloned by the competition. Autolog is threaded through and dictates almost every aspect of this diverse racer – a constant encouragement, a merciless interlocutor.

Autolog's integration into *Hot Pursuit* is sophisticated, but what it does is simple. It tracks you and your online companions, makes comparisons wherever it can, and suggests what events you should be playing next. Someone's taken the top spot on Swerve and Protect when we weren't looking? We'll soon sort that out. As well as this, it acts as the hub for making boasts and sharing in-game 'dreamshots', and even recommends new players that might suit your friends list. It's far more than a superficial layer over *HP*'s racing; it's a miniature social network that influences every in-game choice you make.

And the racing slots right in. *HP* offers up two expansive careers, as either cop or racer, which incorporate several types of tarmac tussling. While straight-up races and time trials keep the two classes separate, the eponymous Hot Pursuits and one-on-one duels (Interceptor events) bring them together. Events last from two minutes to ten, and with Autolog's guidance it's easy to quickly find something that suits your mood and available time. But enough about Autolog. Are these pursuits hot?

Are they ever. *Need For Speed* has made the same compromise for years: unquestionably it's the racer with the sales figures, but it's also the one without a consistent identity. One year it's urban graffiti and crazy turbos, the next it's simulation. Criterion has taken the series back to its first principle of cops vs racers, and constructed a high-octane combat racer of beauty and depth that very rarely dips below thrilling. This isn't just the best *Need For Speed* in years, it's the best arcade-style racer of this generation.

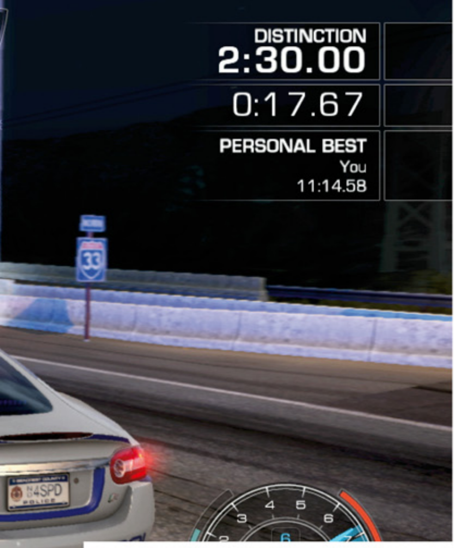


> Criterion has taken the series back to its first principle of cops vs racers, and constructed a high-octane combat racer of beauty and depth

The major difference between the cars in *HP* and, for example, *Burnout Paradise* is their weight. These machines have heft, and screaming along at 240mph they're a real presence on the roads. The basics of racing are simple, and the learning curve rests entirely on cornering at top speed and learning when to pick a fight. The sheer quantity of cars on offer (a new one seems to unlock after every race) and the obvious distinction between two- or four-wheel-drive models means there's plenty of scope to pick favourites, but the step changes only exist between classes. There are five of these waiting to be unlocked for both cops and racers, and generally they get faster; by the time you're on the 'Performance' lineup the vehicles' capabilities are insane, and taking one of these for a spin without crashing is a genuine achievement.



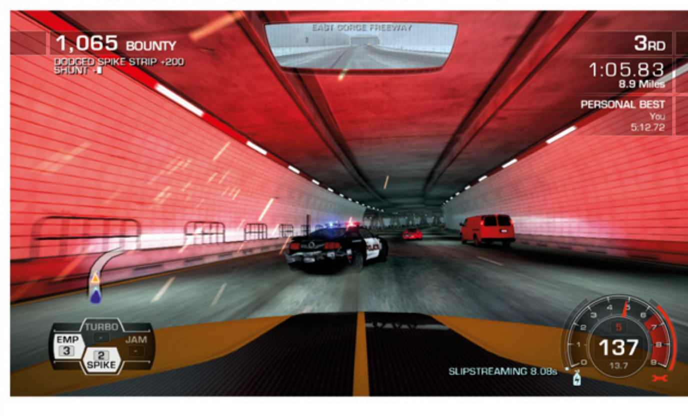
The game can be paused at any point to take 'dreamshots', while snapshots can be taken with a click of R3. It's a real pity, however, that you can't rewind the last few seconds of play to pick the perfect image





The soundtrack tends to be licensed tracks for the racers and an OST for the cops, with a little crossover





But *Hot Pursuit* is only rarely a straight-up racer. The core of this game, both in Autolog and on the tarmac, is competition. The cops and the racers have slightly different toolkits. Both share the spike strip, dropped immediately behind the vehicle, and the EMP, a projectile that automatically hits if the firing car can maintain a lock-on, but the racers also have a jammer that stops opponents using any weapons or seeing their maps, and a turbo boost. The cops get road blocks, which have tiny, car-sized gaps but otherwise cause substantial damage, and helicopters which follow a racer, distracting them before dropping spike strips. All of these abilities counter certain situations and have ideal usage scenarios, but their flexibility is the key. Unless you're truly wasteful with the weapons, there is always something to be done about that racer in front. Although weapons damage cars, they're nothing compared to what you can inflict with your own vehicle, so a lot of combat comes down to setting up an opponent for the grand slam.

At its best, *Hot Pursuit* is unlike any other racer. We've played cop missions that are supposed to be over in three minutes but stretch towards the quarter-hour mark, as some damned racer continually U-turns and





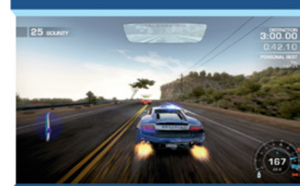
The non-racing traffic generally behaves as you'd expect but, as in the *Burnout* series, it retains the capacity for making truly bonkers decisions – swerving into the path of a Lamborghini hitting top speed, for example

jams our radar in his desperate bid for freedom. There's nothing quite like delivering justice to such a rogue vehicle at 200mph. Playing as a racer, especially online, the chase gets better the closer the finish line and the more cops there are behind you. Online, four racers and four cops are pitted against each other, and initially it can be a chaotic muddle, with cars merrily bashing into each other, but as the police bust the stragglers their focus narrows, setting up *HP* at its death-run best during the final few miles as the clutch of cops bears down on a single beaten-up racer with one turbo boost left – and there's a long straight just around this next corner…

HP has one problem – the takedown camera, which cuts away from the race to show an unfortunate soul crashing and very often resets your car in a less-than-optimal position: heading into a wall, hitting a hairpin at top speed or simply in front of a truck. It does this too often to be dismissed as insignificant and, even though it'll take over steering for a split-second to set the car on the right path, the collisions that follow it have no place in a game of such finesse. Unfortunately, there's no option to turn it off, so it always remains something more than a mere annoyance.

Hot Pursuit is a gorgeously crafted game, but more than that, it's a slick package held together by the quite brilliant innovation of Autolog. In returning to *Need For Speed*'s first principles, Criterion has found its lifeblood, and set it pumping around a structure that will last far beyond Christmas. This is World's Wildest Police Chases meets The Fast And The Furious – and choosing a side is irresistible. **[9]**

Boost bar



Distinct from the racers' Turbo power-up, both classes of car build up boost – the racers by driving dangerously, the cops at a slower but more constant rate. It's not as sensational as some boosts, but a more subtle tool with greater utility for a game in which you'll often be doing anything but driving in a straight line. While drifting, it's a boost out of the corner. Behind an opponent, it adds just enough bite to shunts to cause a serious collision – if you pick the right moment. Best of all, it's perfect for when you've yanked your car to the side to avoid a spike strip or crash – a quick boost rips you back into a racing line. It's another multipurpose tool in a game that's swollen with them.



ASSASSIN'S CREED: BROTHERHOOD

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC, PS3 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT **DEVELOPER:** UBISOFT MONTREAL
PREVIOUSLY IN: E218, E221



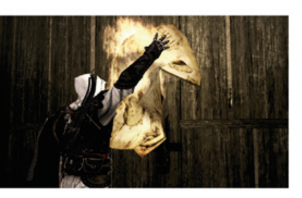
If we are to believe *Brotherhood*, foremost among the tenets of the *Assassin's Creed* is "thou shalt do up thy house". The game's rendition of 16th century Rome is spotted with dilapidated buildings – from banks to brothels – each studded with crenellations and footholds for an easy climb, and each requiring the purse and persuasion of returning lead Ezio. *Brotherhood* has you playing property developer, snapping up useful locations to return them to their former glory.

Little effort is required: *Brotherhood*'s Rome is already glorious. As a series, *Assassin's Creed* nailed believable locales on the first try, and although this time around we've had the customary three cities trimmed to one, the environment we're left with is delightful. A playground for a man with Ezio's parkour talents, Rome feels lived-in and loved. Stalk the streets with your neck craned up and you'll spot beams and scaffolds poking across narrow streets; hop up to roof level and that seemingly random assortment of skeletal architectural remnants syncs up to form a flowing path, no matter the direction you choose to travel. The city's seven hills are a cause for mild consternation, particularly when an objective sits at the top of an impassable cliff – but that's frustration born of entitlement. For a man who can get anywhere in a heartbeat, the long way round – even on horseback – is anathema.

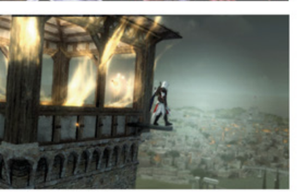
Ezio himself has changed little since his last job – indeed, he's fresh off the back of his confrontation with Pope Alexander (née Borgia, Brotherhood's returning familial antagonists). His skillset largely unchanged, there's little to distinguish him from his prior form. That's no issue when traversing the sprawling city, but ensures that armed scraps remain too rigid and stilted. Escaping unwanted attention is an option – leaping into hay carts is still the most effective method – but without an encyclopaedic knowledge of the streets, it's usually best to stand and fight. From there, it's a short set of button presses – a new, flowing counter-combo attack allowing the chaining of perfect kill-stabs – before you've offed a tower's worth of guards. There's a fine line between assassin and psychopath, and *Brotherhood*'s mass-murder sessions yank the game occasionally into tiresome territory.

Multiplayer has a better line in death. Each player is assigned another as their target, and minutes of stalking are rewarded with either a satisfyingly clean kill or a knife in your spine. The second outcome is especially underwhelming, particularly when your assigned foe's steel hits your back inches from your own target. As such, multiplayer sessions are a high-tension game of cat-and-more-lethal-cat, the balance between protecting your own neck and snapping another's tough to weigh. In forcing you to make life-ending decisions – break from cover, kill in the open – Ubisoft Montreal has created a shifty, paranoid experience, one that has a more palpable sense of mortality than most online arenas.

Singleplayer adds another layer to the equation of death: rather than one man versus a guard rotation, the fraternity of the title are available to help. As in *Assassin's*





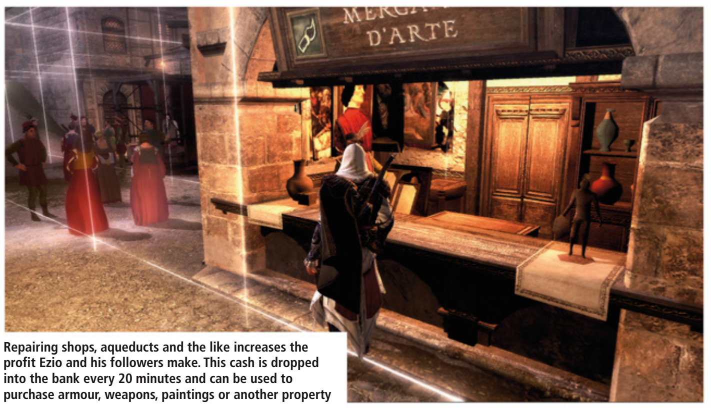


Borgia towers control the districts of the city, raining influence on the populace and restricting the purchase of property



Multiplayer is a high-tension game, the balance between protecting your own neck and snapping another's tough to weigh





Repairing shops, aqueducts and the like increases the profit Ezio and his followers make. This cash is dropped into the bank every 20 minutes and can be used to purchase armour, weapons, paintings or another property





In the guise of Animus-based training, the game also includes time-trial modes, giving the player increasingly complicated geometric courses to complete in a simulation setting







The perfect kill is reward in itself, but bungling a mission isn't always an instant failure – *Brotherhood* is at its most thrilling when Ezio is cornered

Creed II, Ezio gains the trust of the city's underclasses – thieves, courtesans, mercenaries – all of whom wander Rome in groups. Engage a gang in conversation and you can hire them. Firing them off at a set of opponents distracts them long enough for Ezio to get in position – and a set of flirtatious courtesans is sure to keep a guard's back turned on a creeping assassin.

But later, as the city rises to join your social crusade against the Borgia family, Ezio can also recruit fellow assassins – mini versions of himself that seem to hover like drones above the world until they're needed. Locking on to a target and whistling for your new friends gets you a set of allies to fight with. Even better, when Ezio's got the jump on his foe, the first strike from these unseen stars is an immensely rewarding guaranteed kill. There's a compulsive metagame to managing your gaggle of troops: choosing to send them out on missions across Europe will boost their stats and weapon-sets, but mean they can't be used in battle for a short time. Aside from the obvious strength increases these missions grant, there's a simple pleasure in managing a squadron of trans-European badasses, a process which never becomes overly demanding.

That's a design ethos that pervades *Brotherhood*. A central story runs through the game, following present-day Desmond Miles as well as ancestor Ezio, but it's not the riptide *Assassin's Creed II*'s plotline was. Bring up *Brotherhood*'s map screen, and on full zoom it's near impossible to make out landmarks through the sub- and side-quest icons. Like the assassin management minigame, the experience is broken into vignettes – chunks of play that don't outstay their welcome and, if played in a jumbled order, flit between concepts with pleasing regularity. An hour of play is varied, perhaps beginning with a fight-heavy central story mission, encompassing a repressed memory of Ezio's lady-chasing youth and ending with an aerial romp around a Roman tomb. The setup keeps the game fresh and light, with the story never threatening to get caught up in its own Dan Brownisms.

Early on, Ezio's attacked by feral types with a penchant for wolf pelts. The followers of Roman founder Romulus, this collective lives underground in collapsed tombs. Scouring six of these nets Ezio a shiny set of armour

But this is also *Brotherhood*'s weakness. The game's parts are by turns novel and enjoyable, but when played in longer bursts feel repetitive. Brotherhood is *Assassin's Creed II 2*, its new mechanics feeling more like extensions of an existing form than innovations. It's a greatest hits disc, then, a weighty, good-value deal that plays the series' best bits – but there's the constant danger that you've heard them before. **[8]**

Watch your back



The Animus machine, *Assassin's Creed*'s MacGuffin, reappears in slimmed-down form. As before, the game has you playing as Desmond playing as Ezio, but the modern man has upped his abilities. An enjoyable introductory section has Desmond and fellow assassin Lucy hopping through the remains of Ezio's village, cut to the backing track of sarcastic quips from both parties. The Animus also provides a useful conceit for the game's multiplayer and training modes, dodging the problem of reusing a handful of NPC models by suggesting that the experience is a mere simulation.



FALLOUT: NEW VEGAS

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC, PS3
RELEASE: OUT NOW **PUBLISHER:** BETHESDA SOFTWORKS
DEVELOPER: OBSIDIAN ENTERTAINMENT **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E217





There are some neat ex-tourist attractions dotted around, some harbouring dark secrets behind the frozen toothpaste smiles. The Strip itself (above) is a disappointingly tiny proportion of the game as a whole



This is the story of Fisto. A droid abandoned in an old robotics shop, it seemed destined to spend forever in a tube, but one day a wasteland wanderer stumbled in, hacked a nearby terminal and, within seconds, reprogrammed Fisto to be a sexbot, before demanding to be pleasured. "That all you got, robot?" he asked once Fisto had performed its work, swaggering off and stopping only to sign it up for a lifetime of prostitution at a nearby bar (and smooth-talk the proprietor into doubling the finder's fee). What happens in Vegas, as they say, stays in Vegas. Obsidian's sequel to Bethesda's *Fallout 3* has plenty more from where that came from. It's a good thing, too, given the game's litany of problems.

New Vegas' aesthetic and narrative nail the concept, a dose of cheery bluff and the nuclear family mixed with radiation, degradation, and man's inhumanity to man. The open Mojave wasteland is vast, and its balance between space and sites of interest feels just about perfect. A short walk up the road always turns into hours of zigzagging between encampments, caves and cubbyholes, some crammed with juicy items, others looted and burned out, many little more than deathtraps. All offer up something: a set of crockery laid out and abandoned, a smear of blood next to a clutch of empty bottles, a trail of corpses, a treasure map, a stash of drugs, a body shoved in the corner to rot.

It's a bewitching world, and in its most grisly and far-out encounters shows a preternatural feel for the source material. The Vaults are a highlight: masses of huge clanking machinery folded around tiny pockets of people, miniature cities laced with depressing histories that are revealed over careful hours of looking under beds and in corners. If that's too serious, be assured that *New Vegas* swings in every direction. Whether it's love triangles or superweapons, the ridiculous is played straight and the sombre is undercut with a wicked grin. At its very best, *New Vegas* plays loose with its tone, shifting from cheery smile to death-ray in a heartbeat. It's an irresistible combination.

The Mojave wasteland is full of factions, and during our playthrough our character, a suave lockpicker who mercilessly slaughters any back-talking NPCs, managed for a while to string along rangers, raiders and genteel cannibals. Eventually there's a Big Choice to be made about these camps, but until then they're dense networks that interplay smartly, adding a spirited layer of texture.

The basic NPC logic can produce more interesting scenarios. Take Boone, one of our companions. During a routine mission collecting caps from deadbeats who'd skipped their bar tabs, our character fell into a fistfight with a debtor. Unbidden, Boone blew the man's head off in the middle of town. Heads turned, weapons emerged from their holsters, and Boone unleashed hell, killing six civilians before falling under a hail of lead pipes. We ran away minus one



At its very best, New Vegas plays loose with its tone, shifting from cheery smile to death-ray in a heartbeat. It's an irresistible combination







The slow-motion glory of the VATs targeting system can produce some memorable sights as robots' metal bodies crumple and human heads simply detach from their bodies, but the camera all too often messes up and gives you a useless view of a wall instead





Pick your shots carefully when firing in populated areas – merely nicking the wrong person can result in an all-out war with a faction that will then follow you everywhere you go in the Mojave wasteland







One of *Fallout 3*'s least appealing locations was the labyrinthine subway system; thankfully, there's much less in the way of grim, gritty tunnels in New Vegas, though you'll still see a good few grey corridors

companion, vilified by the Freeside community, and leaving plenty of business never to be concluded.

There's a shonky emergence in these moments, though it also manifests in annoying ways – a stray bullet turning the object of a rescue mission into an implacable nemesis, for example, or an accidental unholstering resulting in all-out war. Fault lines run throughout *New Vegas*, and one of the areas that suffers most is combat – a rather unfortunate point, since engaging in conflict lies at the heart of the game.

The absence of aim acceleration is one thing, but feedback is almost nonexistent, and not a single enemy offers up the illusion of intelligence. Damage proportional to apparent threat doesn't figure, so you simply have to get used to housewives wielding rolling pins leaping through shotgun blasts to deliver beatdowns. *Fallout 3*'s combat lacked heft, but its weapons were never as powder-puff as these, and its AI did a much better job of negotiating cramped environments. Gunplay in *New Vegas*, which in theory uses the same elements, is a much looser jumble that never quite comes together.

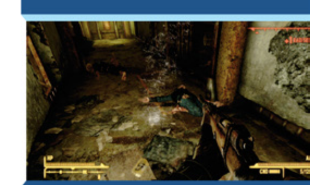
When technical failings enter the mix, battles become hilariously inept. Gangs of assailants bunch up and glitch into the scenery while your companions do everything they can to get in front of your reticule. When it all becomes too much, VATS, everyone's favourite comedy targeting system, just about saves things. Freezing the action and allowing individual body parts to be targeted, VATS then executes the shots in slow-mo. The system's precision and overblown gore make the combat bearable, but only just. The game's climax, a face-off against many heavily armoured enemies, is an absolute slog.

New Vegas' technical shoddiness bears heavily on the game, and outright malfunctions aren't rare occurrences. Walking through the wasteland, texture and object popping presents near-constant distraction. Elsewhere, the jerky framerate clunks and grinds in a bid to spoil your enjoyment of the artistry on offer all around. On four occasions during our playthrough, the game simply crashed. Then there's a scorpion embedded in the road, its exposed stinger waving lamely; a coyote jogging on the spot; a Deathclaw forever foxed by a miniscule rock. Enter a room and crowds will often spawn in the centre and jerk around a particular point before settling down like good NPCs. An outfit will change in a blink when the day-night cycle switches. These aren't exceptional instances – they're ingrained in your journey.

The VATS camera, meanwhile, is awful, clipping through geometry and occasionally freezing up. The wasteland's full of invisible walls which puncture the otherwise exquisitely tuned atmosphere. Boone resurrected outside a casino a few hours after his psychotic escapade, but wouldn't move or speak. He's still there now. And the loading times are simply painful, exacerbated by missions that send you back and forth between bunched-up buildings. Obsidian's reputation for delivering thematically interesting but technically poor games may be unfortunate, but on this evidence it is not unjustified. After pausing the game to write this paragraph, *New Vegas* crashed for the fifth time. It all adds up an experience that makes you wonder about the size limit for console game patches nowadays.

Creatively, *New Vegas* gets almost everything right. Mechanically and technically, it's a tragedy. So it's a simultaneously rewarding and frustrating game, the gulf between what it is and what it could be a sizeable stretch indeed. Few games have built up a world like *New Vegas*, and even fewer have squandered such opportunities like this. **[6]**

Upgrade today!



The hardcore mode, inspired by various *Fallout 3* PC mods, is a well-intentioned swing at 'realism' in this bleak universe: generally, things are more deadly, damage more permanent, and there are more stats to juggle. A crafting system, based around plants and campfires, produces healing items, but there's not enough to recommend its products over the plentiful Stimpacks and Super Stimpacks and justify scouring scrubland for bits of heather.

We tried hardcore mode for the game's opening hours. On our first real sortie into the wasteland, a Cazador (a brightly coloured bumblebee-type insect about as big as your forearm) survived seven headshots from a rifle and a stick of dynamite, before killing us with one sting. The mode can be turned off in the options, thankfully.



BLOOD STONE 007

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC, PS3 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION DEVELOPER: BIZARRE CREATIONS
PREVIOUSLY IN: E220





Although in most regards Bizarre has attentively recreated Bond's cinematic qualities, the facial animation lets it down. Bond himself never changes expression, whether smashing through plate glass or facing personal betrayal

Oddjob



It's a lot harder these days to discuss multiplayer as an ancillary feature, to cram fulsome online offerings into a single boxout. *Blood Stone*'s multiplayer? Perfect boxout fodder. It's scuppered from the outset by your bullets' lack of connection. There's a fuzziness to gunplay which means you often die having moved well out of the line of fire and score kills when your reticule hardly touches your target. Melee sees your fists sweep straight through the enemy. Levels, meanwhile, are unfocused, haltingly paced environments that encourage bottlenecks and killzones.

Well, this really is the next Bond film – but for the wrong reasons. Bizarre Creations creates an action spectacular, its bespoke plot barrelling the player across continents, from casinos to Siberian toxin factories to hydro-electric dams. Things explode while Bond dives through windows in slow motion. High-powered vehicles skid across frozen lakes, and exchange fire at high speed in motorway underpasses. It looks the part, in other words (Dame Judi Dench's slit-mouthed digital deathmask notwithstanding), but, as with any film set, closer inspection reveals it to be all chipboard and polystyrene.

The problem, as with so many games that ape films, is not what it does, but how. *Blood Stone* has all the right Bondish bits, but in boiling them down to an interactive essence, leaves them on the hob too long. Here's the checklist in diminishing order of flavour: sneaking, chasing, shooting, driving. Bond's always at his best in a tux, and when our pouting MI6 mannequin steals among his marks, the licence delivers. Many other heroes do brusque violence, but Bond's appeal is being a brute in a bow tie, flitting between suave and psycho in an instant. But you only get a whiff here: this isn't the dynamic playground of light and shadow that exists in *Splinter Cell*, but a directed journey which never quite evokes the thrill of trespassing nor the fear of discovery felt in Sam Fisher's expeditions.

Similarly, sections in which you escape elaborate deathtraps set up high drama but then reduce Bond's repertoire of moves to contextual onscreen prompts. Even jumping is a context-sensitive command, performed by tapping an all-purpose interaction button. It's a shade more involving than a QTE, but still doesn't recreate the empowering sense of rapid, clear-minded improvisation that is so essentially Bond. Combat makes a grab at this by borrowing *Splinter Cell: Conviction*'s slickly animated melee takedowns and a reduced version of its auto-execute feature. After delivering a suitably vicious chop to the neck or knee to the blood stones, you gain 'Focus Aim' – the ability to automatically target and kill an enemy. You don't mark up targets in advance, as in *Splinter Cell*, and Bond doesn't always choose the ones you want. Occasionally he can't decide at all, and gives up. It's not a problem, as such – the game is hugely forgiving on anything but 'Agent' difficulty – but it chips away at the player's agency.

Otherwise, gunplay doesn't stray from cover-shooter convention. It's fine – but given how versatile each combat encounter was in the superficially similar spy-game *Conviction*, it comes to feel monotonous. *Blood Stone* offers respite through driving sections – opulently crafted vehicular escapades which funnel the player through detonating scenery and between colliding vehicles. Again, the sequences communicate chaos and speed, but leave your controller with less to say. The cars slip through the streets as though covered in butter, and the game alternates between allowing you to slide off obstacles and round bends and plunging you into instant death. The punishment isn't severe, but the multiple restarts feel anticlimactic.

Bizarre knows Bond's constituents well, even if the game's ho-hum plot is more in keeping with standards set by Die Another Day than Casino Royale. But with the exception of fleeting moments, the game's milquetoast mechanics don't cut it – watching a superspy and being one are very different things. *Blood Stone* is generously doused in the films' dressing, and in that sense its problems pose a question which is quintessentially Bond: if you put a gorilla in a tux, is he still just a gorilla? **[5]**







Enemies are eager for you to kill them up close, since this fuels the Focus Aim mechanic. There's a strange bathos to it: a hoodlum trundles in, only for you to pop up and plant a fist in his spine

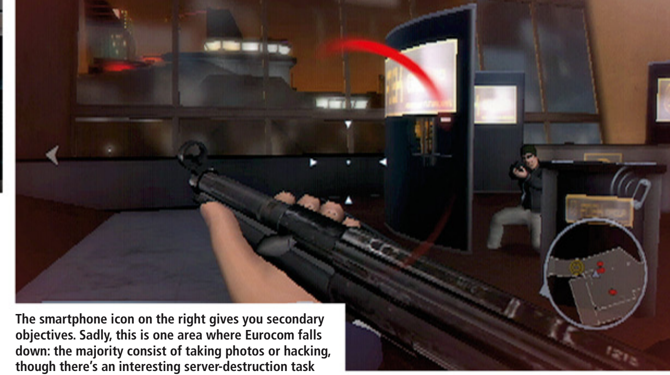




The levels, despite all being rather similar, are often set up well, beginning with a brief 'civilian' interlude or a more obviously stealthy approach, before those darned terrorists start pouring out of the walls







The smartphone icon on the right gives you secondary objectives. Sadly, this is one area where Eurocom falls down: the majority consist of taking photos or hacking, though there's an interesting server-destruction task



GOLDENEYE 007

FORMAT: WI **RELEASE:** OUT NOW **PUBLISHER:** ACTIVISION
DEVELOPER: EUROCOM **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E220

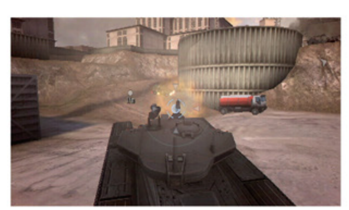
GoldenEye 007 doesn't just hark back to a classic shooter, but also a time when Nintendo's platforms hosted them. Nowadays, when it comes to popular genres – and shooters in particular – the words 'on Wii' serve more as a qualifier rather than a boast, and are usually shorthand for 'better elsewhere'.

This game certainly suffers from the most obvious comparisons, not least because its core mechanics are identical to *Call Of Duty*'s. You've shot these guns, seen this take on the firstperson perspective, and faced these enemies before – but it was probably last week rather than 13 years ago. Not a wholly bad thing, of course, and there are many reasons why *COD* is the biggest-selling shooter series right now, but *GoldenEye*'s singleplayer action can never quite escape the fact that, visually, it's imitating a template that papers its cracks with spectacle. You've seen these explosions before, too, then – and they looked much better.

How much this matters is a question for individual players, but Eurocom's answer is at least a fun one: the game tosses everything at you, and then the kitchen sink explodes. The effects might not be all that pretty up close, but there's so much going on during its big moments that you're swept along anyway, the blood pumping as you beam a big fat inner smile at the thought that you're Bond. Remember that feeling?

If replacing Pierce Brosnan with Daniel Craig seems a questionable choice, it's one that makes sense in this moodier take on the GoldenEye story. There are plenty of good lines, but not many funny ones, and the absence of Boris – surely the best minor character – is a big, pen-twiddling, badly accented hole in the fabric. So, when it gets to multiplayer, *GoldenEye*'s trump card is surprising: slapstick.

Fourplayer splitscreen won't win any beauty awards (the screenshots on the back of the box are misleading, to put it kindly) and judders a little, but it's shambolic fun helped immeasurably by a plethora of daft options – our initial favourite the one that makes players explode on contact. The original was brilliant because it knew that playing with your friends isn't about headshots and killstreaks; it's about levels filled with tons of proxy mines and ganging up on whoever's best. *GoldenEye 007* understands this, and that's far more important than the odd dropped frame.



Tank-based action was a low point of the original, and despite our hopes, here it's pretty much the same: roll through dull environments shooting boxy vehicles

Online it's a different species – a *COD*, to be precise. Your character persistently levels up and unlocks weapons, there are all the modes that come as standard, plus a few twists of its own. There's a neat bag-carrying-or-destroying gametype, and there's definitely a little buzz in being encouraged throughout the match by M.

It's also speedy, a quality that can't be undervalued for a Wii online game (though once again the Wii Speak hardware hardly puts in a solid performance). As an Xbox 360 online shooter, *GoldenEye 007* might not create more than a ripple, but on Nintendo's hardware it's a standout release.

Living up to the legacy of Rare's almost universally adored original is a thankless task, and *GoldenEye 007* is not an entirely unworthy heir. If the 1997 original is still the benchmark for a shooter on Nintendo platforms, this new version has a distinction of its own. It's not as big and shiny as the crossplatform competition, but it's the most fun and in-depth firstperson shooter of its type on Wii, which counts for a great deal.

Importantly, Eurocom's game delivers when it comes to the nostalgia factor, reimagining a world that most of us know intimately. In giving the fans what they want, and delivering what a modern audience needs, the studio has created a game that, while not quite a classic, sometimes reminds you of one. A respectable outcome, then, for what was always something like mission impossible. **[8]**

I am invincible!



It's possible to take a stealthy approach through much of the singleplayer, and it's a welcome alternative to the familiar guns-out shooting, though not a subtle enough factor to really dial up the tension. Big gunfights slow you down considerably, which is a decent enough carrot to try the quiet way frequently. And the enemies here, despite coming to life through slick animation, are also stupid, registering as dangerous only in large groups.

The original's completion times are also homaged in *GoldenEye 007*'s time trials, which spit out a funny or game-breaking option upon completion, which should add replay value. But, despite the multiple routes and conscious stealth possibilities, the campaign here is a more straightforward beast and probably won't bear too much repeat play.



There are plenty of objects to be unlocked as you progress through the game, and much of the challenge comes down to the physical differences. If you want to jump a hot-dog van over a line of buses, *Create* has you covered



CREATE

FORMAT: 360, MAC, PC, PS3 (VERSION TESTED), WII
RELEASE: OUT NOW **PUBLISHER:** EA **DEVELOPER:** EA BRIGHT LIGHT

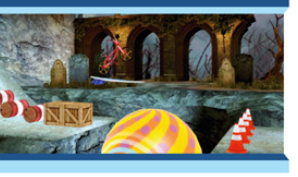
Create isn't the clone of *LittleBigPlanet* it initially appears to be. If anything, it's a reaction to it. If Bright Light has genuinely set out to deconstruct Media Molecule's divisive masterpiece, the studio has clearly decided that such a dangerous experiment in player freedom needs a gentle reining in. It's all a question of ambition, really. *LittleBigPlanet* allowed players to build almost anything they could imagine, but the price to pay was the terror of the blank page and the steep learning curve of a toolset that feels more like the work of engineers than artists. *Create* would rather handle much of the heavy lifting itself; the trade-off is that, while you'll be able to get things up and running a lot quicker, EA's game is not as deep or as fascinating an experience.

Does that matter? At heart, *Create* is a physics-based puzzle game rather than an elaborate platformer. The bulk of the elegantly paced campaign mode has you placing objects, building contraptions and modifying environments in order to solve a range of increasingly tricky spatial brainteasers, many of which conform to the blueprint of 'get Object A to Point B'. It's swift and often witty, with each themed world giving you a selection of different challenges, while every success slowly fills up your toolbox.

The interface has been stripped back to radial menus and a kind of iTunes Cover Flow homage, and it never gets in the way of your ideas. Equally, although you're generally dealing with a range of ready-made items and will rarely have to resort to building things from scratch, the game forces you to think laterally with challenges that reward distilling a solution down to its most economical expression, and others that encourage antic over-engineering as you fill empty stages with the buzzing guts of pinball machines. Even the trickiest conundrum can be solved through pleasant experimentation, and *Create* lures you through its less inspired moments with a healthy unlock schedule of new parts, textures and decorations.

With scope for free-building and options to share creations, solutions and home-made puzzles with other players, *Create* is a generous game, but it can often be a bland one as well. The fiddliness that can sour Media Molecule's toolset isn't present, but neither is a lot of the character that made so many people stick with it in the first place. With its Ikea backdrops and clip-art objects, Bright Light has perhaps paid too much attention to functionality and not enough to form. If *LittleBigPlanet* spent most of its time with its head in the clouds, then *Create* is often too down to earth – an understandable flaw, but one that no amount of tinkering can easily remedy. **[6]**

Sacked



Rather than a Sackboy, a roving cursor is the player's primary means of interacting with Bright Light's world. It's an understandable design choice, but once again immediacy and clarity come at the cost of charm. A game like *Create* is sorely in need of a hint of personality for the player to focus on. Without a friendly face at the end of each challenge, the whole thing can become a fairly bland assemblage of fireworks, toys and landscape gardening.



Create's scoring system encourages you to fill levels with bumpers and springs as you ricochet objects back and forth. Often, getting to the goal is only half the challenge. Textures can help to spruce up the various stage sets you're given

EA has a lot less difficulty navigating 3D space than Media Molecule ever did. Move integration should help this further







Boss fights are traditional but fairly spectacular. Expect grandiose monologuing and well-signposted attacks. While the game is quick to settle into a formula, however, it still has a few surprises in store



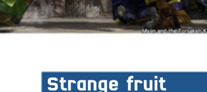
Stealth is simplistic, but provides one-hit kills. It's a good feeling to know you've avoided a prolonged battle, too



MAJIN AND THE FORSAKEN KINGDOM

FORMAT: 360, PS3 (VERSION TESTED) **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: NAMCO BANDAI **DEVELOPER:** GAME REPUBLIC





Majin And The Forsaken Kingdom wants to take you back in time, to a charming era when man made friends with mythical beasts and when – rather less charmingly – games were riddled with awkward platforming, awful So-Cal voicework, and inane cutscenes that broke up the action every 30 seconds or so. Game Republic's latest makes a faintly shabby first impression, then, but its rough-edged wonkiness also serves as a tart reminder that the flaws in videogames are often front-loaded, while the pleasures can take a good few hours to take hold.

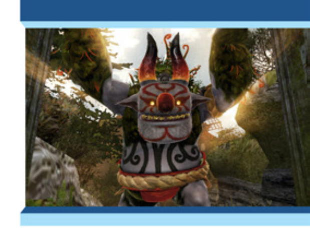
And despite its sketchy implementation, *Majin* is easy to love. Generous rather than polished and smart rather than pretty, this tale of mismatched friends may never quite blossom into the *Ico*-alike it wants to be, but it's still an endearing and thoughtful adventure. With a lumbering giant in tow, you set out to free the kingdom from the grip of generic darkness through an equally familiar mixture of puzzle solving, platform leaping and combat. Locked doors must be bypassed, bosses beaten, and your child-like monster's suite of special attacks must be reawakened to open up new areas.

In between set-pieces, the game can feel like a prolonged escort mission but, while a desperate paucity of audio clips makes Majin likely to have you reaching for the mute button, he's easy to control, responding well to commands, and he helps spruce up the combat with punchy co-op finishers and a welcome splash of tactics. Elsewhere, the jungles and catacombs are enlivened with increasingly devious spatial challenges and the developer's trademark flashes of brilliant fairylight colours, and although the game is eager to settle into a familiar pattern, it offers enough variation to pull you through to the end.

The game doesn't stand out as an action-platformer, puzzler or stealth game, but *Majin* still brings its various elements together with a scrappy charm. The Muppety appeal of your lantern-jawed sidekick grows throughout the game despite the pitiful script, and while progress generally comes down to getting through the next locked door, the game is often imaginative when it comes to the keys it gives you. More importantly, there's a genuine sense of storybook adventure to proceedings, which a limited budget and uninspired enemies can't quite erode. While it's not a top-tier outing by any means, *Majin* remains a solid piece of work from a team that is perhaps getting used to working with limited resources. **[7]**

Combat can feel slightly weightless until you learn to make the most out of your accomplice. Co-op finishers can be supremely satisfying

Strange fruit



The key to levelling up your Majin lies with feeding him fruit, most of which looks like over-sized costume jewellery. Making your way back through enemy territory weighed down by a massive mango commonly provides a study in annoying vulnerability, but the monster's gleeful toe-tapping as he gets a sniff of his dinner is one of the more appealing animations in the whole adventure. It's a welcome blast of charisma for a game in which a lot of corners appear to have been cut.

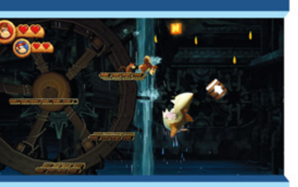




DONKEY KONG COUNTRY RETURNS

FORMAT: WII **RELEASE:** DECEMBER 3 **PUBLISHER:** NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: RETRO STUDIOS **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E219

Easy way out



Mirroring both *New Super Mario Bros* and *Super Mario Galaxy 2*, *Donkey Kong Country Returns* has a Super Guide feature that lets you leapfrog particularly infuriating levels, should you so choose. Die repeatedly and you can press the Plus button for help at level checkpoints, whereupon a white-furred Donkey Kong swings in to rescue you from the level's cruel clutches by means of a prerecorded playthrough. There is a penalty, of course, to go with the sense of humiliation: you can't keep any collectibles. It seems that this is becoming a mandatory feature for Nintendo's platformers, which could be no bad thing since it's a way of making them more accessible without having to soften the core challenge.

Donkey Kong Country Returns and *New Super Mario Bros* share a spirit of nostalgic reinvention, but this year's flagship Nintendo 2D platformer feels very different from the previous one. Kong is weightier than Mario, more bestial, barrelling through bug-eyed nasties and pounding his palms against the ground with a vigorous shake of the Remote and Nunchuck. With motion control, Retro Studios has combined the precision platforming of Rare's originals with the satisfying, chest-thumping physicality of *Jungle Beat*.

Stuffed with delightfully disguised hidden things such as bananas, coins, bonus rooms, K-O-N-G letters and jigsaw pieces, levels are left-to-right jungle rampages, occasionally flirting with the third dimension, blasting Kong out of a barrel towards distant background platforms or through a hollowed-out tree trunk, zooming in and out of the screen. Rather than steadily unlocking a suite of abilities, your limited monkey tricks are applied in ever-wider situations, with frequent barrel-rocket races, animal rides and high-speed mine-cart interludes to break up the climbing and jumping.

A second player can jump in at any time to take control of Diddy Kong, offering an extra two hearts to absorb damage and a steadying jet boost at the tail end of jumps.



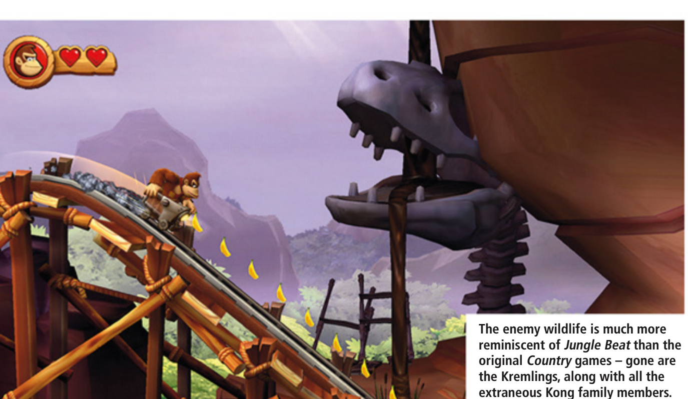
Platforms get smaller, farther apart and more likely to crumble under DK the more you progress through the game. By the sixth world, it's properly challenging stuff

But this isn't a game designed around co-op – there are no two-person challenges. Playing with help simply makes things ever so slightly easier, which is certainly appreciable in such a difficult game. Checkpoints are far from generous and the challenge is unrelentingly fierce. There is, however, a get-out clause if you hit a solid roadblock (see 'Easy way out').

Aesthetically, the worlds of *Donkey Kong Country Returns* feel glisteningly organic. Tubular plants spurt goop and shinies when Kong pounds the ground near them, and blowing dandelion seeds reveals hidden trinkets. Wildlife is everywhere, constituting all of the enemies and many of the obstacles, with chubby sharks, baleful hippos clinging to poles, and wheelchair-bound dinosaur fossils. The colourfully ugly boss creatures, from giant, squawking birds to a team of railway-engineer moles, are as consistently surprising and inventive as the rest.

Unfortunately, the level design doesn't boast such creativity. *Donkey Kong Country Returns* begins recycling itself before the end of the third world. The mine carts become whale rides or bat chases, but then morph back into mine carts. Those secret-concealing plants and dandelion seeds are sometimes replaced with chests, teetering pots, candles or whirling spores, but their function never changes. The first few hours promise boundless variety, but by the end all of the best ideas have been re-used at least twice.

An early bonus level, in which the Kongs are silhouetted against the setting sun with only that red tie and cap to distinguish them from the rest of the foreground, hints at creative flair that never quite materialises in a larger sense. Retro Studios has done a fine job with the *Donkey Kong Country* concept, ably translating its appeal for a modern platform, but it doesn't push it much further. **[7]**



The enemy wildlife is much more reminiscent of *Jungle Beat* than the original *Country* games – gone are the Kremlings, along with all the extraneous Kong family members. Cranky still turns up to run a shop

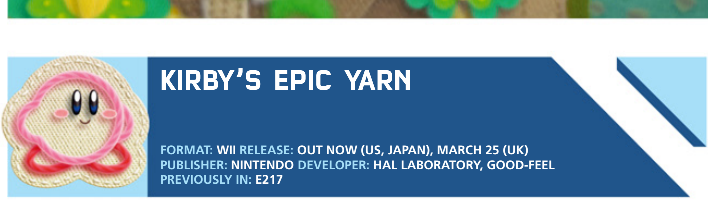








Epic Yarn's visuals can feel a little inconsistent – while buttons are usually graspable, they're not when functioning as an angry beast's eyes. Lens flare made out of string is a fine sight to behold, however



KIRBY'S EPIC YARN

FORMAT: WII RELEASE: OUT NOW (US, JAPAN), MARCH 25 (UK)
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: HAL LABORATORY, GOOD-FEEL
PREVIOUSLY IN: E217

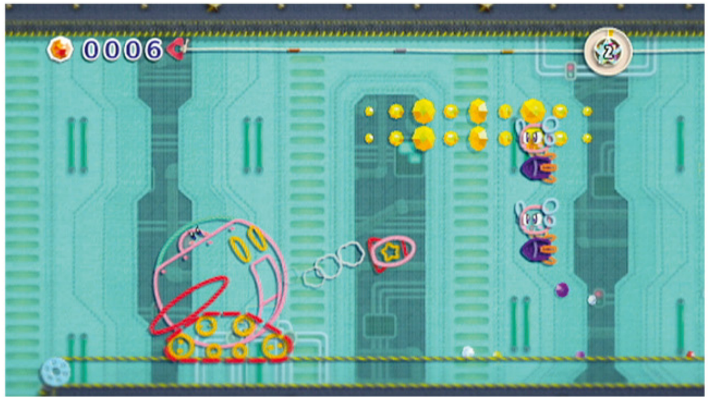
When Kirby snacks on a magical tomato in *Epic Yarn*'s saccharine opening sequence, the ensuing transformation from pink balloon to piece of twisty wool isn't just visual. Granted, he keeps the ability to morph into a ground-pounding block with a tap of down on the D-pad, but that extended floaty jump of his? Gone. As is his ability to gobble up enemies and hijack their abilities. And yet he still feels like Kirby. It's partly because his new woollen whip works a lot like the vacuum breath he had before, ensuring that enemies within range can be snatched up and flung back at their comrades. But it's also because the most important aspect of Kirby's powers remains – the sheer superiority of them.

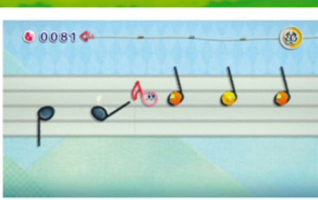
It's easy to forget just how capable Kirby is. His *Epic Yarn* incarnation can unravel almost any enemy at the tap of button, turn into a car with a double-tap of the D-pad, and transform into a parachute to guide his falls. If an enemy does hurt him (and that will take more than just brushing up against one), he'll scatter collectibles, Sonic style, then dust himself down as if nothing happened. Even a fall offscreen results in being gently returned to the last available platform.

As a result, *Epic Yarn* is two games – a careful collect 'em up in which players search every stitched nook and quilted cranny of its patchwork world in order to find each level's full complement of items and gems (earning a gold medal for their trouble), and something altogether more leisurely: a lightweight platformer which makes up for a lack of obvious challenge by generously sprinkling each level with mechanical – and, more notably, visual – gimmickry.

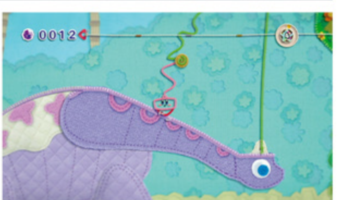
Not since *Yoshi's Island*'s designers broke out the crayons has a Nintendo platformer looked so much like a work of craft, but it's a pity that, for the most part, the levels don't feel as fresh as they look – a platform made of butterfly stitching is still just a platform. There are flashes of *Super Mario Galaxy*-esque inspiration here, in levels that transform Kirby into a musical note floating along a stave, or sections in which – morphed into a train – he navigates track laid down by pointing the Remote. Kirby's transformation into forms as diverse as a giant tank, UFO or dolphin provide pace-changing variety throughout, and twoplayer co-op makes for some amusing moments. Players can grab and fling one another on to (or off) ledges, but in doing so they'll be circumventing the singleplayer design rather than engaging in a tailored co-op experience.

But the fact it can accommodate all these experiences is to the game's credit. Whether you're searching every last stitch of the levels for collectible furniture (see 'Changing rooms') and gems, or unravelling a giant woolly octopus with a friend, *Kirby's Epic Yarn* is as welcoming as a fluffy blanket, and almost as pleasant to be wrapped up in. **[8]**





Levels occasionally make it tricky to retrace your steps – annoying if you've missed an item. A restart can be made from the menu, but, since death is impossible, checkpoints don't appear





Bosses look fantastic, their size allowing for a greater realisation of the design. While the first few are relatively simple, later examples offer more interesting challenges

Changing rooms



Between levels, Kirby can return to his 'pad'. It's unfurnished when you move in, but not for long. Around each level are scattered three pieces of furniture which, back in the pad, can be used for a spot of interior decorating. Kirby can also gain neighbours by decorating the empty adjacent apartments to specific standards, with each new neighbour providing access to new challenges in completed levels. Completing these grants new fabric patterns as a reward, allowing Kirby to head back to his pad and get started on upholstering that sofa.







The game features a workout mode, in which you play through the same routines but with a calorie counter on the screen. It's a fun way to exercise, but some specialist routines wouldn't go amiss

The tracklist could have been ripped from a nightclub. Lady GaGa's Poker Face is *Dance Central*'s introductory song, and Just Dance also appears. But where, Harmonix, is Bad Romance?

DANCE CENTRAL

FORMAT: 360 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: MTV GAMES
DEVELOPER: HARMONIX **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E218



Dance Central places a helpful red glow around any body parts not moving correctly. It can still be a struggle to figure out precisely what you're doing wrong, though





Five years ago, Harmonix released *Guitar Hero* and capitalised on a simple fact: almost everybody wants to be a rock star. Spend time with *Dance Central*, however, and you'll soon suspect that the music-loving collective has long been aware of a more universal truth: that no one, not even the shyest wallflower, can resist tapping their feet in time to a beat.

Existing somewhere between the first *Guitar Hero*'s simple, four-button fantasy fulfilment and the strict tutelage of Pro mode in *Rock Band 3*, *Dance Central* is first and foremost a gruelling memory test. Your inaugural experience of a song is likely to be in Break It Down mode, which chops up dances to the level of individual steps.

Learning a routine requires a level of body awareness unrivalled by any game in Kinect's launch line-up. The dancer onscreen doesn't match your moves; you attempt to match theirs, as flashcards floating up the screen indicate upcoming steps. Break It Down asks you to perform a step three times to confirm you understand the movements. If you're really stuck, you can slow the tempo of the track with a swipe of your left hand – and speed it back up again with another. Moves range from the basic steps to complex arrangements. Pulling off a jazz square for the first time feels quite the achievement, and it gets much harder than that.

Once you've mastered a song in Break It Down, you can take it to Perform It, where you're scored on your attempt to run through an entire routine. When *Dance Central* works, the feeling is borderline euphoric – in the blood-pumping, serotonin-inducing way that only dancing can be – as you find yourself stringing moves you learnt individually into coherent routines. Until, of course, you mess up. Trying to watch both the dancer's movements and the side of the screen for upcoming steps is a challenge best avoided by memorising how each step is performed beforehand, allowing you to concentrate on switching between motions and keeping in time.

For the most part, Kinect feels up to the challenge of following these complex routines. There were times when we stamped our feet in frustration, convinced the camera wasn't following our beautiful dancing and giving us the flawless ranking we so clearly deserved, only to notice we'd been dropping our left arm a little too soon, or dipping when we should be flicking our hips. However, there were also times when we genuinely couldn't figure out where we were going wrong and didn't know whether to blame the hardware, the software, or both of our left feet. One area of definite weakness is the game's ability to pick up more subtle movements – occasionally giving you a free pass for simply standing still.

There's not a strong sense of progression to *Dance Central* – just a list of increasingly difficult routines, the mastering of which is a reward in itself. And the moments when you achieve a couple of minutes' harmony between yourself and the music, the moments when you surprise yourself with what your previously graceless body can do – they really are a reward. Harmonix might have turned a generation of wannabes into rock gods, but that was easy. Much more bold is walking up to the wallflowers and convincing them to throw some shapes. **[8]**

Party central

How good a party game is *Dance Central*? We're not sure. It would have to be a patient party, where the guests were all prepared to learn the routines before taking each other on in the one-on-one dance battles, in which players take turns to rack up a high score. Ironically, the accessibility which Kinect is supposed to provide has been offset by the precision that it is able to demand. Still, playing with company can be very entertaining – it's the best way to appreciate the gulf between the digital dancers' smooth moves and the players', and is also an excellent way to show off just how flexible your hips can be.

Rather than asking players if they're right- or left-handed, *Kinect Sports* simply asks them to pick up apparatus with their right or left hand. It's a convenient way of avoiding menu-screen fiddling

Your speed in the track events is based on how high your knees reach rather than the rapidness of your steps. Naturally, running over the line in the javelin and discus events results in foul throws

KINECT SPORTS

FORMAT: **360** RELEASE: **OUT NOW** PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS**
DEVELOPER: **RARE** PREVIOUSLY IN: **E218**

Considering the large number of Wiis condemned to lives as nothing more than *Wii Sports* machines, it's either a very good or a very bad thing that Microsoft hasn't bundled *Kinect Sports* with its own motion-sensing device. This game is a fun, generous package that demonstrates effortlessly the potential of the tech that powers it, and is all too easily imagined sitting comfortably inside the disc trays of family-focused Xbox 360 owners long after Christmas has passed.

That's partly because it offers more than most games of its ilk. There are six major gametypes – although one of these subdivides into five further activities – and a clutch of minigames that distil the sports into score-attack versions of their component mechanics. Add in increasingly challenging AI foes, and a party mode that blends the games on offer into 15-minute medleys designed for larger groups, and there's as much potential lifespan here as a compilation game could ever claim to have. It helps, of course, that the games are thoroughly entertaining too.

Football's a good starting point, not least because it's a sport that Kinect can handle but other motion-tracking solutions can't. The game removes dribbling to focus instead on passing and shooting. When in possession, arrows point out unmarked players in your team, and when defending, those same arrows identify the likely trajectories along which an opponent may shoot. Games, especially in multiplayer, have a rapid ebb and flow, as one successful tackle puts a player a couple of passes away from scoring opportunities. But be warned: you'll need a lot of space for *Kinect Sports*.

Beach volleyball has a similar rhythm, and works like goalkeeping in football. Icons flash to indicate where the ball is headed, and you rush to put your arms there before it's too late. Played cooperatively, it's not always terribly easy to tell whether it's you or your teammate that a prompt is aimed at, although a grasp of the sport's particular patterns of touches that set up attacks makes things easier to follow.

Motion-sensing stalwarts bowling and (table) tennis make polished appearances, though both show the potential pitfalls of controller-free tech. Bowling allows you to be pinpoint accurate, but it takes a while to get the hang of applying spin to a ball you don't physically release. There's nothing at all wrong with table tennis, meanwhile, but the Move-assisted *Sports Champions* version of the game is just that bit more precise. Boxing – another motion-sensing veteran – is able to accurately distinguish between high and low blows, and attempts to punish blind flailing by building up the power meter of guarding players. Despite this, however, multiplayer matches still favour furious aggression.

Track and Field has a novel idea – minigames within a minigame – and is by far the most tiring sport. Of the five events which make up this mode – javelin, long jump, sprint, hurdles and discus – four involve running on the spot, and while this works surprisingly well in races, it again takes a little adjustment for the events which in real life require you to convert built-up momentum into a jump or throw.

It's a slick package, and much of the charm is to be found in the polish and detail: the snippets of licensed tracks – including the theme from Chariots Of Fire – which play during action replays; the ridiculous costumes of the party mode mascots; the Avatars themselves, which back in the hands of their creators have become more characterful than in any game seen so far. No game since *Wii Sports* has done so much to capture Nintendo's mixture of initial accessibility, entertainment value and wide appeal. **[8]**



The mascots in Party Play, which range from giant carrots to menacing sharks, can be a bit awkwardly shaped for easy play, and can block your view of the track ahead, among other things



The bonus games offer a chance to hone some of the skills used in the individual sports – like scoring goals, for instance. Many are thoroughly engaging high-score experiences in their own right

Half-time slot



While aggressive branding and licensing is nothing new to a sports title, there's something a little odd about the plethora of brands that have wormed their way into *Kinect Sports*' innocent, cartoon-like world. The Microsoft and Xbox stamps found on everything are to be expected, but the fact that every single television in *Kinect Sports* world is a Samsung is a bit of a surprise. T-Mobile, meanwhile, has been featured more creatively. Perhaps wary that sticking phones in an Avatar's hands would be a bit too blatant, the network operator's logo has been stamped on pink bowling balls instead.

This shout goes out to all the MCs waiting for multiplayer mic support. Hello? MCs? We hope this feature finds its audience

DJ HERO 2

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PS3, WII **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION **DEVELOPER:** FREESTYLEGAMES

If you want to copy a person's success, you start by copying the person. In FreeStyleGames, Activision has found the best and perhaps only analogue to *Rock Band* creator Harmonix. Who else has the same even split between game and music makers, the poise to let content and ideas bounce back and forth between them, and the sense to ensure that a brilliant videogame pops out at the end? In *DJ Hero 2*, that last point is all-important. With the exception of rather superfluous microphone support, everything achieved since last year involves software.

The playlist might lack anthems to rival Dizzee Rascal vs Justice or Tears For Fears vs Eric Prydz, but the selection overall is smarter. There's less repetition, less guitar, and more personality. It's another great line-up made awe-inspiring by its origins.

Abandoning all pretence of the controller as turntable simulator, FreeStyle has made a hypnotic, superior score attack even as *Rock Band* veers away from the abstract. Not to say that FreeStyle has embraced the metaphors of *Amplitude* or *Audiosurf*, but the feeling is the same: negotiating these tracks is more like piloting a spaceship than spinning decks, and all the better for it.

For one thing, it's an entirely positive experience. Failure is literally not an option, and your journey through mixes that now make seamless, beat-matched transitions is assured. Better still, its attack options, risks and rewards scale with your skills as a player. The chance to momentarily double your multiplier with a deft twirl of the dial is almost ubiquitous now, but demands judgement every time.

It's a system that very naturally sets up some excellent multiplayer modes, and this is one of an elite few that can truly even the odds between players at different difficulty levels. In Accumulator, the winner is the one who's 'banked' the most notes. Only chained notes count, and banks are limited, though new ones can be earned with perfect streaks. Thus, the Easy player makes fewer mistakes with fewer opportunities while the Expert takes the risks in a starfield of notes. Checkpoint Battle, meanwhile, is a Duelling Banjos mode that provides the career mode, entitled Empire, with optional boss battles. With the entire tracklist unlocked from the start, ready for drop-in, drop-out Party and Quick Play, *DJ Hero 2* is as progressive in many ways as Harmonix's latest and greatest.

The only sticking points are that DLC from the first game has to wait for an announced patch before being usable, and that you can't import on-disc content. This gets more painful the more you think about it, and we can only hope it's not some insurmountable licensing issue that dogs the series forever. Given that FreeStyle's is now the only *Hero* that matters on just its second spin, it's surely worth the effort. **[8]**



A very welcome change is the automation of effects, which last time were chosen with the dial, jarring with the flow of play

Star power



Star cameos were one of *DJ Hero*'s strengths, and despite the fine efforts of RZA (as alter-ego Bobby Digital) and Deadmau5, Daft Punk remain the best so far. There's a greater authority to the new mixes, with many unique tracks and directions. Our favourite is DJ Jazzy Jeff's deceptively simple mix of Busta Rhymes' Put Your Hands Where My Eyes Can See and Pump Up The Volume by MARRS, which besides being brilliant is soaked through with nostalgia. Performances are a mixed bag, though, David Guetta in particular totally outshone by FreeStyle's own caricatures.

KINECT JOY RIDE

FORMAT: **360** RELEASE: **OUT NOW**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS**
DEVELOPER: **BIG PARK** PREVIOUSLY IN: **E218**

Kinect *Joy Ride* is the only Kinect launch game that goes out of its way to stop you feeling in control. By taking the need to accelerate and brake away from the player, it strikes an awkward compromise. Yes, you really do feel in charge of steering, but when the amount of speed put into a tight bend is dictated by the game, not the player, that feeling only delivers so much.

For the most part, *Joy Ride*'s courses are spacious enough to allow for some over- and understeer. There's a madcap kind of fun to be found in careening around the edges of the track, smashing through the mercifully paper-thin scenery and zooming back into the throng with a boost (hold your arms in to charge, then push out), but it's fun that lasts only until you tire of the unpredictable nature of controlling your vehicle. Battle races, meanwhile, add on another layer of chaos in the form of the usual assortment of pyrotechnic kart game weapons – there's even a teleport, for a truly random experience.

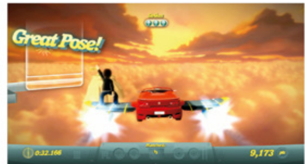
Outside of the bendy race courses, *Joy Ride*'s auto-acceleration starts making sense. Dash courses send you hurtling down a straight track, dodging obstacles en route, whereas Stunt mode drops you in a half-pipe and lets you try to grab as much air (and as many collectibles) as you can within a strict time limit. Neither mode has much need for a brake button. Nor does Trick mode, but that's only because it's a 'match the pose' minigame that has as much to do with driving as yoga. As a bunch of lightweight minigames, these alternative modes work, but they're not enough to offset *Joy Ride*'s fundamental limits as a racer. **[5]**

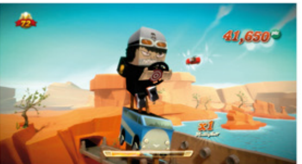




***Kinect Joy Ride*'s bright colours and chunky designs seem a natural home for 360's Avatars – in fact, Kinect has given them a prominence and purpose which until now they've lacked**







One of *Joy Ride*'s minigames dumps you in arenas filled with things to crash into (main) and ends with players hurting into the face of a 'boss statue' (above right). All these modes support play with a friend



FIGHTERS UNCAGED

FORMAT: **360** RELEASE: **OUT NOW**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT** DEVELOPER: **AMA STUDIOS**



Some of the awfulness – like the manga-style cutaways that announce your enemy's limb afflictions – is so guileless that you can't help but laugh

In a number of respects, this is a worse game than PS3's motion-driven boxing game *The Fight* (see p101). Weak production values have crafted an ugly mishmash of bug-eyed cartoon and sneering street grit. There's less depth to the character progression, fewer stats to massage, no personalisations to make. And it doesn't have full-motion video of Danny Trejo sweating in a well-soiled vest. It's also far less ambitious with its motion control – opting to tie gesture recognition to canned animations rather than one-to-one movement replication – and in some ways it functions more effectively.

Which isn't to say it functions very well. Somewhere around a third of your movements are ignored or misinterpreted, and those that are recognised are enacted slothfully. Get used to the rhythm of these delays and you can effect some damage limitation – and at least when it does recognise a blow you can guarantee it will be delivered with reliable force, so long as you're in range. There's a system of close, medium and long-range attacks, and player/opponent proximity is described through onscreen prompts. It's crude, but more transparent than *The Fight*'s ambiguous presentation of depth and your character's never-reliable analogue reach.

Progression is governed by earning 'crowns', which you obtain by beating your own record against a fighter by a sizeable margin. Advancing up tiers of fighters involves earning hundreds of crowns, so you'll face the same guys again and again, often eking out no more than four or five crowns at a time; when defeat or victory in a fight relies on such muddy recognition, it feels exhausting and arbitrary.

The ideas and content here are thin on the ground, and limply implemented, too – it's inexcusable that a game whose sole interaction is hand-to-hand combat should not be able to tell the difference between dodging and headbutting. *Fighters Uncaged* remains just about workable thanks to its prescribed attack system and unsubtle prompts, but its botched attempt at motion control leaves it lolling about on the ropes. **[3]**





KINECT ADVENTURES

FORMAT: 360 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT DEVELOPER: GOOD SCIENCE STUDIO

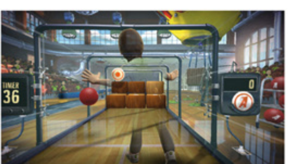


Open a brand-new Kinect box and you won't find a sports compilation nestled snugly inside, you'll find *Kinect Adventures*, the minigame collection with its sights set firmly on becoming as synonymous with its tech as *Wii Sports* is to Wii.

It's a confident introduction to the device. Some of its best achievements are functional: drop-in, drop-out co-op has never been as seamless as this. Joining a friend in-game is as simple as walking up beside them, and if you want to leave? Just leave. It's conducive to a social or familial atmosphere in a way that few other games manage to be.

Whether or not the minigames that make up *Kinect Adventures* could hold their own in a party setting is another question. None are poor (though the plug-the-cracks-with-your-body game 20,000 Leaks is perhaps a little too *EyeToy* for comfort), but neither does a single game stand out. The body-controlled *Breakout*-style game that is Rallyball comes close, but it's let down by being the one game where the need for quick, precise actions makes Kinect's impressively low lag detectable – though you'll learn to compensate pretty fast. The real problem is that, with more than half of the minigames on offer requiring a similar range of full-body movements to play, there's little sense of variety – no leisurely round of golf to follow up that exhausting game of tennis.

KA does make some attempt to control the pace of the experience; the adventures of the title refer not to the games themselves but themed combinations made from them. It's a novel way of giving sessions purpose which minigame compilations can often lack, and makes for a more joined-up package than many games of its type. Unfortunately, it's just a rather limited one. **[6]**



Rallyball (above) looks like it's made for hands and feet, but you'll soon find that throwing your whole body in the ball's path is more effective



Some adventures will have you collect vast quantities of tokens over different games, such as Space Pop (left) and River Rush (above)



KINECTIMALS

FORMAT: 360 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT DEVELOPER: FRONTIER

Now this is how you do a minigame collection. And make no mistake, that's what *Kinectimals* really is – a selection of interactive toys and games given continuity by the animals with which you share them. Indeed, the Kinectimals aren't traditional virtual pets – it's impossible to neglect them, just as it's not really possible to train them. Early on, it's the player being trained – constantly getting told the range of tricks the cubs will perform, and the activities they can do together.

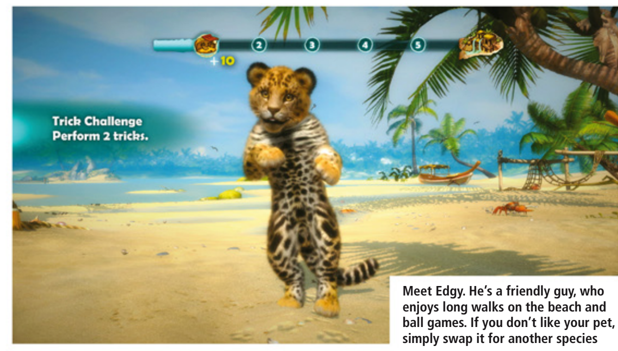
Progress isn't made by developing a relationship with your cat – it adores you from the beginning. Instead, it's made by unlocking new areas to play in on an island. Engaging in basic activities – doing tricks, playing a game of fetch, for instance – scores points, which in turn unlocks more in-depth contests, in which you can guide your pet around an assault course, or steer a remote-control car (with your feline clinging to the back) around a track. Play with your pet for long enough and new sections of the island (with their own unique toys and contests) begin to emerge.

Kinectimals' minigames vary in quality, though the sheer volume of toys, activities and contests certainly makes a mark. Most require simple motions to execute, though some require a little acclimatisation to perform well. You'll learn that it's easier to aim a ball by adjusting the position of your body rather than fine-tuning the arc of your throws.

This game's intended target audience is likely to respond to the beautifully animated pets with squeaks of delight, though exposure to the **Edge** test family did result in two children vying for the attention of a camera that would only accept one of the little terrors at a time. Menu navigation (which uses an odd, two-arm system) might also be awkward for younger players, but with a parent on hand to introduce children to their fabulous furry new friends, there's plenty of fun to be had. **[7]**



Special mention must go to *Kinictimals*' lovely fur. It's the glossiest, sleekest, fuzziest stuff we've seen in a game. The grass isn't bad, either



Meet Edgy. He's a friendly guy, who enjoys long walks on the beach and ball games. If you don't like your pet, simply swap it for another species



GOD OF WAR: GHOST OF SPARTA

FORMAT: PSP **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SCEE **DEVELOPER:** READY AT DAWN

Having successfully conquered the technical challenge of translating *God Of War* to PSP with *Chains Of Olympus* two years ago, Ready At Dawn's next task is to rectify that title's pacing issues.

Suitably for a spin-off, *Ghost Of Sparta*'s narrative is more intimate than the grand mythology of the home console iterations. Kratos' journey to the heart of his lost brother's forgotten story gives the title a simple, singular focus with enough motivation to convince us it's worth battling on.

That battling is done with the familiar and functional combo system the series is known for, remixed via the introduction of new weapons to prevent monotony creeping in. Combat may be lifted wholesale from the core titles in the franchise, but that doesn't mean the developer has fallen back on a simple copy and paste. Since the camera is fixed – and the screen space reduced – each enemy encounter requires careful framing to empower the user to their bloodthirsty ends, and Ready At Dawn has staged each battle with an eye for usability as much as dramatic effect.

The QTE sections are where *Ghost Of Sparta* stumbles into frustrating territory, their windows of opportunity often too small to allow first-time success. It's a problem partly absolved by the generous distribution of health and magic chests, and the frequency of save points which cater to bite-sized play. Puzzles have been diluted, too, removing the eye-straining observation tests the series often rolls out.

Unlike its protagonist, *Ghost Of Sparta* is generous, forgiving and fun-loving. It's a well plotted and paced, if straight-laced, action adventure that takes most of the strengths of the main franchise while removing a few of the weaknesses. Though it doesn't brand the series with anything new, it maintains a level of quality throughout that's evident in too few handheld action games. **[8]**

Hacking and thrashing your way through multiple opponents comes at no cost to the framerate. Technically, this is PSP gaming at its finest





Finishing moves are as gruesome and cruel as they've ever been. Grabbing is a particularly useful manoeuvre when the going gets tough, especially in later levels when airborne enemies turn up

SONIC COLOURS

FORMAT: DS, WII (VERSION TESTED)
DEVELOPER: SONIC TEAM **PUBLISHER:** SEGA
RELEASE: OUT NOW







The setting, Eggman's space-based amusement park, offers up the requisite sugary visual rush

Somewhere in Sega HQ is a well-played copy of *Super Mario Galaxy*. In *Sonic Colours*, the spiky-haired hedgehog riffs on (and rips off) his one-time rival's tour de force in ways that range from the obvious – the cartoony sci-fi theme; the levels in which Sonic ricochets from one planetary body to the next; the drill power-up – to the more fundamental. And to give *Colours* its due, it gets the fundamentals right, succeeding in wrapping a *Sonic* experience around *Galaxy*'s rhythm of play punctuated by spectacle.

Like *Galaxy*, perspective shifts abound. A level in *Colours* may begin with you viewing the action from behind Sonic as he hurtles into the screen, but moments later you'll be platforming on a 2D plane or falling from the sky – the camera floating above Sonic now, as you guide his fall. When the hedgehog picks up speed, such sections could zip by in less than a minute, and while *Colours* can occasionally be disorientating (and even annoying, when it sends you hurtling towards enemies you couldn't see a moment before), the rest of the time it's quite the rollercoaster.

A selection of alien power-ups called 'wisps' vary the platforming. Green wisps, for instance, turn Sonic into a wall-bouncing laser beam, whereas pink wisps turn him into a spiky sphere able to climb up walls. A few are multipurpose tools, while others are one-shot gimmicks; all allow you to access portions of stages that would otherwise be out of reach. How much you'll want to explore stages designed as linear obstacle courses is another matter, though. Platforming itself can be awkward since Sonic's floaty jump is perfect for high-speed leaps but less so for tackling a more intricate arrangement of platforms.

Ultimately this is a collection of ideas executed with variable success, which at times coalesce to form an effective whole, and at others feel like flashy distractions from an otherwise unambitious central formula. **[6]**



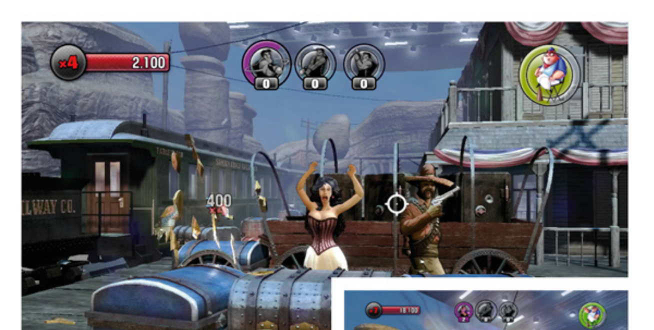
Sonic's spin attack (which also recently appeared in *Sonic 4*) maintains the pace of the game by homing in on enemies at high speed and from far enough away to be useful. It's frustrating when it pulls you in the wrong direction, however





THE SHOOT

FORMAT: PS3 **DEV:** COHORT GAMES
PUBLISHER: SONY **RELEASE:** OUT NOW





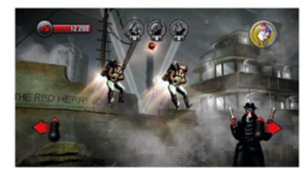


Players don't have a life bar. Instead, the green bar in the top right of the screen measures how happy the director is with your performance. Miss targets and take damage, and he'll start moaning

To be fair to *The Shoot*, it gets the basics right. It just attempts very little beyond them. An on-rails shooter in which players are gently tugged through five themed sets of levels – and that's 'set' in the cinematic sense, for *The Shoot*'s levels are Hollywood facades, populated by cardboard-cutout baddies and strategically placed destructible props – the visual design is its best feature. Each series of levels cartoonishly parodies a specific genre of film, particular highlights being a run of mobster movie-themed shootouts populated by villains that look like steampunk Helghast.

It doesn't ask much of the Move controller. You aim by angling the wrist – even if you use Sony's retro-futuristic gun attachment, it doesn't have sights to aim down – occasionally dodging left or right by leaning the controller. Chaining a series of accurate shots grants powers such as a short burst of bullet time, activated by spinning on the spot, or an area-of-effect attack channelled by shooting at the ground.

The problem is that there isn't anything of substance behind the set dressing. Until the final movie makes an appearance (and, with each movie offering little more than half an hour's play, it'll make an appearance quickly enough), enemies are uninteresting props which blow into pieces spectacularly yet do little else. Some have flickering shields, or a weak spot, and others require you to perform a gunslinger-style quickdraw as a coup de grace, but far too many simply trundle into view, waiting to be shot at. The one incentive for replay is racking up a high score – a process which is more memory test than sharpshooter challenge. With the lightgun genre on Wii having thrown up the carefully directed thrills of *Dead Space: Extraction* and the over-the-top grindhouse pastiche of *The House Of The Dead: Overkill*, *The Shoot* is left feeling a little B-roll. **[5]**

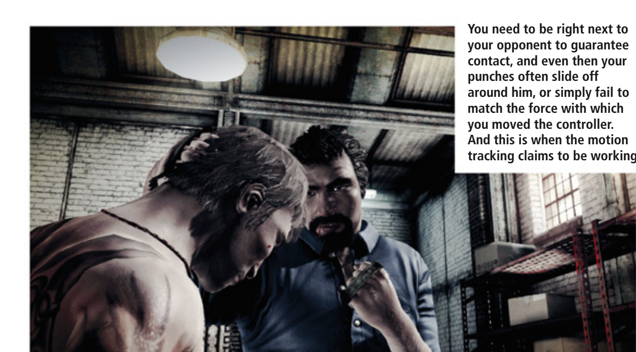


The on-rails gameplay harks back to the simpler days of arcade shooters, and offers very little new outside of its use of the Move controller



THE FIGHT

FORMAT: PS3 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SCEE **DEVELOPER:** COLDWOOD INTERACTIVE



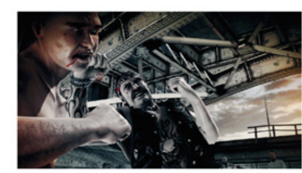
You need to be right next to your opponent to guarantee contact, and even then your punches often slide off around him, or simply fail to match the force with which you moved the controller. And this is when the motion tracking claims to be working

There aren't many games in which cinema's scariest ex-con Danny Trejo looms onscreen to hiss at you through his moustache while gripping a pair of glowing Move controllers ("bad boys", he calls them). Nor, again, can there be many bare-knuckle boxing games in which the control scheme is so disastrous that an out-of-shape game critic would likely stand a better chance in a real fight.

One-to-one motion control sounds good, but it only works if the game can remember how long your arms are. You'll shoot fists out to full reach and the slugger onscreen will simply waggle his hand like he's shaking a particularly viscous yoghurt drink. Periodically, your elbows clip into your chest and out through your spine, and the game will often give up on headtracking altogether, splashing a warning across the centre of the screen as your fighter takes a vigorous pummelling. Headtracking's used to duck and dodge; when it breaks down, the emergency alternative control scheme should step in, but that doesn't always work.

The game recalibrates before each bout, and seems satisfied to continue, so its amnesia is hard to excuse – particularly when you glimpse moments of satisfaction in a well-timed block or a deftly placed uppercut. But the game is otherwise flawed: the camera angles often block the view of your opponent and give little sense of depth. If you're using two Move controllers, you walk by dipping them in the desired direction, but such inputs sometimes get muddled and your character sticks his fists out in the direction he's moving.

There are minor things for which *The Fight* can take credit. The progression of skills is well-paced, its 'street' aesthetic pioneers a delightful new direction for extreme cheese, and your flailing proves quite the workout. And if it doesn't really manage to tell you much about boxing, at least Danny Trejo has tips on what makes a good shiv. More than anything, though, *The Fight* stands as an ugly illustration of the difficulties involved in the execution of motion-control gaming. **[3]**





The RPG-esque skill progression would be interesting if the control scheme didn't dictate the best build. You also unlock skills by completing achievements and 'dirty' moves for extra damage



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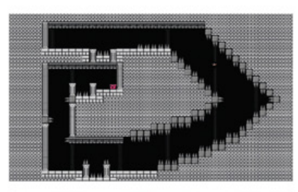
SUPER MEAT BOY

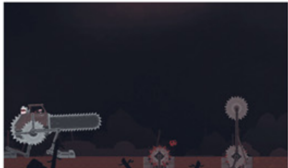
FORMAT: 360 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: TEAM MEAT **DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE

In the age of the retro revival is born a curious beast: the contemporary retro game. *Super Meat Boy* first found expression as a Flash game back in 2008, but its origins are in the '80s with *Mega Man* and *Super Mario Bros*, and in its reinvention for XBLA the more recent likes of *N+* also have a structural influence. If that makes it sound like a Frankenstein's monster of a platformer, well, it is. But it's a beautiful one.

Somewhat undersold by its creators as a hardcore experience, there's no doubt that *SMB* has hair-tearing and teeth-gnashing moments. Its greatest tricks are an instant restart and its protagonist – a sloppy brick whose momentum is married to expertly implemented controls, creating a tool that slips, slides and sticks around the devilish levels. Mastery of Meat Boy is half learning curve and half instinct: it's always clear what you have to do, and often how, but pulling it off is another matter. The levels are clockwork traps, sadistic little wheezes piling up one on top of the other, filled with tempting bonuses and just-about-reachable warp zones that turn a relatively simple objective (get to Bandage Girl, for example) into the coward's option: it is a game designed to be replayed rather than run through, and the rewards – lovingly crafted 8bit tributes and playable characters with new abilities – are worth the pain. It's also a showcase for a fertile imagination that dreams up new tricks every few levels, and the way its core elements are regularly stretched before being turned inside out and upside down is admirable.

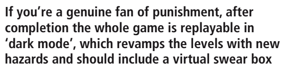
Never knowingly subtle, *SMB* is at its best when purely slapstick – when a grinder is placed just so, because every neophyte's first jump will land there. When it becomes more straight-faced about what you should be doing – when it demands you be serious while flinging a block of meat from pillar to post – it crosses a line and becomes a grind. Thankfully that error is a late one, and the majority of *SMB* is a finely executed tightrope act of death and rebirth, as funny as it is fun and as precise as it is inventive. **[8]**





The bosses are visually brilliant, though the later ones tend towards remembering a pattern. If games don't work out, Team Meat has a future in cartoons – the cutscenes are short but hilarious





If you're a genuine fan of punishment, after completion the whole game is replayable in 'dark mode', which revamps the levels with new hazards and should include a virtual swear box





NO HEROES ALLOWED

FORMAT: PSP **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SCEE **DEVELOPER:** ACQUIRE CORP

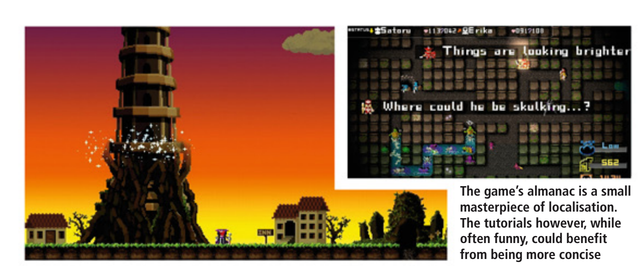


In your dungeon is the goal for every invading hero: Badman. When one finds him, and carts him back up to the surface, it's game over

Haruyuki Ohashi, the director of the first two *What Did I Do To Deserve This, My Lord?* games, has said he hopes the third instalment, with its new, pithily localised title, will prove more accessible. Rest assured, it won't. This is *Dungeon Keeper* by way of *Viva Piñata* – building a devilish defence against do-gooders by massaging a delicate and extremely elaborate ecosystem. The basics are easy enough to grasp: smashing blocks of soil with your pickaxe cursor spawns monsters. The rest you won't understand unless you've sat through – and committed to memory – 15 lengthy tutorials.

It's beautiful, if wholly baffling. The lower-level critters pass nutrients from block to block, infusing them with the power to spawn higher-level monsters. But as these eat lower-level beasts, you'll need to constantly micromanage their populations to keep your defensive line from starving. On top of that, other obscure preconditions coax further varieties of creatures from the earth, while your dungeon dwellers can be levelled up and mutated. There are stress and intelligence levels to manipulate, along with a parallel nutrition system for mana and a whole new ecosystem for flooded areas of the dungeon. Individual heroes too have their own preferred patterns of exploration, which can be exploited for the purpose of dividing and conquering, and weaknesses to certain forms of attack. But knowing what the simulation entails is one thing – controlling it is another.

Much of this will be familiar to committed fans of the franchise, and *NHA*'s novelties are few. Of greatest benefit are the difficulty levels – although even 'n00b' mode won't give an easy ride. A co-op option allows for more hands-on tutelage and offers a useful division of labour for put-upon dungeon keepers. But the real prize remains the same: the intricate simulation. Dizzyingly deep and often opaque, it nonetheless unlocks to put an enormous variety of strategies at your pickaxe tip. **[7]**



The game's almanac is a small masterpiece of localisation. The tutorials however, while often funny, could benefit from being more concise


PlayStation.2
Katamari
塊魂
Damacy

TIME EXTEND

KATAMARI DAMACY

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **NAMCO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2004**



Namco's colourful tidying game is an obsessive-compulsive cleaner's dream. But its smart design gives to the world far more than it removes

Absurdist Japanese curio? Doubtless. Sole occupant of the stick 'em up genre? The game is almost beyond imitation. Unflinching condemnation of humanity's rampant consumerism? Perhaps. Autobiographical study of what it is to live under the watch of an alcoholic father figure whom you can never please? We'd have to roll creator Keita Takahashi on to the shrink's couch to find out. Roadmap to a future of game design in which an idea precludes its sequels by reaching its full potential by the time the final credits, quite literally, roll? If only.

There are many ways to articulate *Katamari Damacy*, PS2's most eccentric release. The most straightforward is to state its simple, unchanging rules: roll an adhesive ball around the world. As you stick small objects to its surface, so its size increases and so you are able to collect larger objects. Repeat until your ball is large enough to become a star.

But while this explains the game's core process, it does nothing to express its absurd wonder, the delight that comes from combining a sachet of soy sauce with a mousetrap, an encyclopedia, a mobile phone, a bonsai tree and a salmon into a giant sticky ball. So maybe this ludicrous game is best described as a plain joyful celebration of human inventiveness, a playpen in which the world and everything in it is a collectible just waiting to be gathered for pure enjoyment's sake.

In truth, *Katamari Damacy* is all of these things and a great many more, a game still ripe for dissection, its lessons and idiosyncratic values largely ignored by the gaming world around it despite offering some of the most biting commentary and delicious solutions to its ongoing problems.

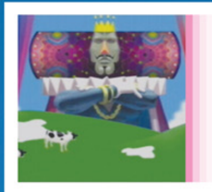
You play as an alien prince, a diminutive green spaceman with stick arms, eastern eyes and an antenna protruding from his head. Despite your royal lineage, your profession is that of a garbage collector, tasked with cleaning up humanity's mess by rolling up the world's debris with the titular sticky katamari ball under the watchful, disapproving eye of your two-planet-tall father, the King of All Cosmos. After a drunken night out, the king explains in his broken yet authoritative stoner patois that he accidentally knocked the stars from the sky. Your job, then, is to transform mankind's mess into something beautiful by firing the katamari and the everyday objects that are now stuck to it into space, where it can light up the heavens.

That the mission begins in a Tokyo bedsit is notable. Stuffed with the clutter that any modest living space breeds, the room provides a safe, bordered playpen in which to learn the game's basics, while appealing to every Tokyoite's sense of urban claustrophobia. Here is a chance, the game proposes, to rid yourself of the paper clips, safety pins, sticky tape, mahjong pieces, leftover sushi, discarded sweet wrappers and empty bottles of soda that invade our tiny worlds. As you roll over each item it sticks to the ball with a satisfying bubble-wrap pop of pleasure that sees the object immediately gain the katamari's adhesive properties, thereby able to stick yet more objects to its surface.

Here is a chance to rid yourself of the paper clips, safety pins, tape, mahjong pieces, leftover sushi and empty bottles that invade our tiny worlds

As the ball increases in size, so does your reach into the world. Large objects, from whose sides you would previously bounce off, become easy





SMILE LIKE YOU MEAN IT

Katamari Damacy's achievements are many, varied and distinctive. But it's first success comes moments in. "Naaaa na-na-na-na-na-na" – the male a cappella that breaks the silence of the game's initial loading screen is sung with a softness that's in direct contrast to its childish melody and lyric. It's both playful and melancholic, summing up in a few notes of musical performance the game's two enduring characteristics. Seconds later, the singer is joined by an entire *Space Channel 5* orchestra, all horns and rolling snare drums to back an explosion of an attract sequence filled with dancing pandas and rainbow-spewing volcanoes. The effect? You smile.





The HUD is refreshingly simple, with a colourful diagram showing exactly how much bigger your ball needs to be to complete the level

prey as your ball grows in girth. Cats, errant children and skateboards that would chase you at first touch can suddenly be consumed and the hunter becomes the hunted. In this way, your dominance of the environment increases, one object at a time. In this way, the game mirrors the interactive trajectory of so many modern games, in which you start off small and powerless and, with time and effort, grow to master your surroundings.

Here, the arc is literalised as you not only become the master of your environment but also begin to absorb it. What begins as a compulsive tidying game, in which you clear the bedsit's floor of mess, escalates to unthinkable proportions. At an undefined point the urge to clean becomes the urge to consume and, now, grown to three metres, you are no longer picking up the little things that annoy you, but the animals, people and furniture of our world that stands in your way.

In time, nothing is too bulky to withstand your sticky attention. The forces that drive you towards different objects are twin: either to see whether you can pick the thing up and, if so, what that object might look like protruding from your ball, or because you have a vendetta against something that previously stood firm against your thrusts. So jabbering schoolchildren who once laughed at you will, in time, stick to your katamari, their legs flailing comedically from its side. If cyclists irritate, then in one graceful roll you can remove them from the scene; likewise cars, vans or lorries. Pets roaming the streets can be scooped up, while the gates and walls that previously closed you off from areas of the game soon yield to your bulk.

Each stage is subject to a time limit, lending the experience a Supermarket Sweep tinge as you race to absorb as much of the world as you can, driven on by the dual urge to cleanse the world and please your father by meeting the size quotient required. As the level ends, your hand-built katamari is fired into space, where the King of All Cosmos passes comment on it, admonishing all but the greatest overachievers. Meanwhile, every new object you pick up for the first time is added to the game's encyclopedic records, both providing you with the urge to seek out new, unseen objects and simultaneously celebrating the diversity and creativity of humankind.

This is the core tension running through the game, one that arguably mirrors the very same tension that exists in all of us: to simultaneously destroy and create. On the one hand, there is joy to be found in returning to nature, in clearing all evidence of man's influence on the world, restoring the hills and seas to their blemishless beginnings. And yet, at the same time, there's the wonder of recognition in the sheer variety of all that fills our contemporary world, and patching





Hidden within the mass of collectable, stickable objects are the Prince's long-lost cousins – collectibles within collectibles. Find one and you unlock the ability to use that alien in the next level, in place of the Prince. There's some joy to be had in catching 'em all








Katamari Damacy is a curiously gender-neutral game, and appeals to all ages. Perhaps the urge to tidy up resides even in teenage boys

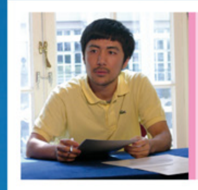
them together to make some new monstrous hybrid holds rare joy.

By the end of the game you have turned from an entity barely able to lift a paperclip to a roly-poly Godzilla, snatching volcanoes and cruise liners from the Earth's crust and sea's surface, sweeping up coastal towns in seconds. It's a process of rare ingenuity and elegance. Over the course of the game your sole core ability – to roll things up – grows and develops, but in a single, defined way. Where most videogame characters grow by unlocking new moves, or ever more powerful ways in which to dominate the world around them, *Katamari Damacy* replicates that feeling of journey and progress along a single trajectory: that of scale. In this approach it succeeds in being more successful than almost any other with this singular, tight focus.

It's a process of rare ingenuity and elegance. Over the course of the game your sole core ability grows and develops, but in a single, defined way

So too does the game set a wonderful example of how best to wrap up a videogame, offering players a natural endgame to all that has gone before. Having moved from collecting the tiniest detritus of city living to the giant-like glee of hauling cities and mountains from the Earth, you are given the ultimate katamari to roll in the credits sequence: the moon itself. As you roll the lunar globe around the Earth, collecting as many of its 195 countries as you can before the credits finish, the King of All Cosmos wryly comments: "Finally, there are no more borders." So the game fulfils the desire of all games, to escalate its core idea to the grandest scale imaginable, transcending all borders it set out for itself in the initial stages.

Katamari Damacy, like few other games, attracts deeper criticism, players searching for metaphor and meaning among the fairytale story and bold interactions. Perhaps this is because the game does little to play up to its themes, leaving the player to draw their own conclusions and never forcing a point. In mixing its bright, childlike aesthetic and saccharine pop-tune backing with confusing dialogue and mixed metaphors, there's almost a distaste for straight talking. It's an aversion, one shared with its main character, towards being pinned down. This approach allows players to engage with the game and its world on their own terms at their own level, and as a result *Katamari Damacy* is perhaps the only game whose fans are just as likely to knit a katamari-themed tea cosy or scarf as post a forum thesis on its didactic anti-consumerist message.



ROLLING ON OUT

Keita Takashasi (above), the game's outspoken, inimitable creator, has often talked publicly about his disappointment that *Katamari Damacy* was turned into a franchise by Namco Bandai. While some interesting new ideas were introduced into subsequent games – such as stages in which you were required to only collect up objects of a certain type – in general the *Katamari* sequels have failed to meaningfully expand on the original's well-rounded template. This fact no doubt contributed to Takahasi's increasing sense of disillusionment with mainstream game development, resulting in his departure from Namco Bandai earlier this year.







THE MAKING OF…
BLADE RUNNER

The story of what happened when sci-fi gaming met its maker – paranoid androids included

FORMAT: **PC** PUBLISHER: **VIRGIN INTERACTIVE** DEVELOPER: **WESTWOOD STUDIOS** ORIGIN: **US** RELEASE: **1997**

How do you sum up Blade Runner's influence on videogames without something along the lines of 'Let there be light'? Bringing together four masters of speculative science fiction – author Philip K Dick, illustrator Syd Mead, filmmaker Ridley Scott and special effects pioneer Douglas Trumbull – this bleak film noir unknowingly landscaped vast regions of today's virtual worlds.

Its vision of a near-future Los Angeles, a society pushed to the limits of architecture, industry, technology and population, remains a touchstone for designers whatever their trade. And as 2019 approaches looking nothing like it, it's not relief that we feel but regret; we've got its problems of isolation, privatisation and the demise of the natural world, yet we've failed to invent the flying cars, sky-piercing towers and offworld colonies. No wonder our artists choose, with apparently endless enthusiasm, to build such futures for themselves.

A commercial slow burner, Blade Runner's imagination stretched far beyond the reaches of the Hollywood system, its bickering creators and the confines of the silver screen. It was an anarchic, accidental, colossal undertaking with backstage drama to rival any of its 116 minutes. Or 113, 114, 117 minutes – however many its different versions, each considered definitive by someone or other, happen to take up. "I wouldn't say it's an ensemble piece," suggests **Louis Castle**, co-founder of the now defunct Westwood Studios, "I'd just call it 'screwed up'."

Blade Runner's imagination stretched far beyond the reaches of Hollywood, its creators and the confines of the silver screen

He should know. When the Blade Runner Partnership, having gone through EA, Sierra and Mediagenic (aka Activision), approached Virgin with plans for an official game, the complexities of the licence had yet to be revealed by Paul M Sammon's essential document, Future Noir: The Making Of Blade Runner. Scott's movie just swallowed money, exhausting investors and secondary investors before ending up with The Ladd Company, run by media mogul Sir Run Run Shaw, and Tandem Productions' Bud Yorkin and



FUTURE IMPERFECT

Apparently you can't make a complete Blade Runner game nowadays without bankrupting yourself and anyone foolish enough to help. But that hasn't stopped a few loyal fans from making just a bit of one, or, in the case of one superhuman map maker, squeezing it into *Unreal Tournament*. First he made it for *UT*, but wasn't happy, so he rebuilt it for *UT2004*. Still not happy, he had to be talked by drooling players into releasing it at all, and was last seen complaining about how rubbish it is. DM-2019-XS (above), however, is not rubbish. Impractical, yes, but that doesn't stop it capturing the looks and atmosphere of just about every Blade Runner set within a single giant map. More recently, The Replicants' winning entry in the Game-Artist.net Scene From A Movie contest (below) did it again in CryEngine 2, attempting just a single street scene but going all out on detail.





The number and effectiveness of shadow-casting lights in *Blade Runner* make it doggedly futuristic at a time when developers publicly grapple with the drawbacks of deferred rendering. Unfortunately, words like 'aliasing' don't begin to describe early voxels

Jerry Perenchio. True to form, it bled even them dry, all the way down to favours and promises.

"Ridley had to sign lots of deals with actors for residual rights," explains Castle of his favourite movie. "The entanglements were very deep in the sense that different people had different deals. And worse yet, the production ended on a sour note and many of the records were lost. So no one knows who might come out of the woodwork claiming ownership of the film, or even pieces of it. We were prohibited from using any footage or audio because we'd never know whose rights we might be trampling on."

Yet this dire situation is what, in a roundabout way, landed Westwood the job. Before any of it emerged, Castle's pitch already described a very rare kind of tie-in that would "add value rather than borrow it." You'd play a character within the Blade Runner world while the movie's story unfolded. You'd be part of it and able to affect lots of things, but nothing already captured on film. "You'd be behind the camera, amid things left unexplained, wallowing in the mythos," says Castle.

Westwood knew that

Yorkin's partnership was on a strict timeline. It didn't know why – that this was the latest of many negotiations with publishers and studios – but had to deliver its pitch in little over a week.

"We put together a demo of the first few minutes of the film, from the point where the Spinner flies in and lands," recalls Castle. "We crunched all weekend and I went in there with our pitch. I went down the list: you'll be a character who won't know if they're Replicant or human, and the game is centred on the fact that you're never quite sure. As you play through, you should always feel you're successful no matter which route you choose, so it never sends you back to start over. At the end, you should be able to finish with very different expectations of what and who you are next to someone else who's played the game."

"I don't know if you know Harrison Ford's position on the games industry... He's firmly against it in many ways. He's disenchanted"

The clincher: "'That's our story – now let's show you what it looks like.' And we played the video, which used a compression technology we'd made for the original *Command & Conquer* games that offered full-screen, high-resolution [640x480 pixels at the time], full colour graphics. Bud said: 'I was going to ask what you'd use from the film; now I need to ask why you'd bother.'" Every scene in the game, it was confirmed, would be generated from scratch in 3D.

It wasn't until months later, when the game was actually announced, that Westwood learned just how many studios had been approached to make it. Some even thought they were still very much in the running. "A bunch of folks called and said: 'I was working on that!' I didn't even know we were competing," insists Castle. "But I guess it came down to the unique approach. In my discussion of what is and isn't appropriate for a property, I'd made a lot about how just running around shooting Replicants would be very unsatisfying for those who like the Blade Runner ethos. I think that's what convinced them, together with the quality of the visuals at such short notice."

Unable to use footage or even the beloved Vangelis soundtrack, Westwood could at least use people from the movie, though it pretty much ruled out two of them from the get-go. "I guess Ridley had a pretty bad falling out; we weren't able to get hold of him or Harrison Ford," says Castle. "I don't know if you know Harrison Ford's position on the games industry, but he's of the mind that it's taking liberties with licences, so he's firmly against it in many ways. He's disenchanted. So I don't know if we failed to get hold of him or just



couldn't get past that bias. But virtually everyone else on the film we did get to work with."

Contributions from Syd Mead added to a wealth of concepts for LA 2019. (When asked for materials for this feature, Mead's agents insisted his file on the game was slim, his work on it short.) But despite "executing it faithfully," the team soon realised that something wasn't right. The onscreen Blade Runner, after all, is quite some departure from Mead's perfectly conceived drawings. The new version was faithful, all right, but to the wrong source material.

"So, I went and found the guy in charge of doing the sets for the film – not the designer but the engineer," says Castle. "We hired him as a consultant and said: 'Look, here are the concept drawings of the set for, let's say Deckard's office or home, and here's what's in the film. How did you get from there to there?'

"He said: 'Well, we looked at Syd Mead's stuff and said we'd love to do it, but we don't have a million dollars to build each set. So we just went to the scrapyard, these props rooms, and grabbed anything similar and just bolted it on, spraypainted it and whatever we had to do to get it as close as we could.' With that revelation, I went back to our 3D artists and said: 'Look, you have access to these 3D libraries with all this stuff you can use, and you're no longer permitted to make anything from scratch. You can only cull things and modify them; you can cut it, repaint it and scale it, but you can't rebuild.' Using that same discipline, we got a look in the game that felt very, very close."

Extraordinarily so, in fact, for a game released while 3D hardware was still finding its feet in the PC market. Just a small handful of sets were used to make the movie, recycled and positioned to look like many more. The game had to build 100, many open to player exploration, "with richness and density in the millions of polygons. Graphics cards at the time could manage, at best, a couple of hundred polygons per frame. Even the highest-end graphics card would have had a terrible time reproducing one character, much less these rich environments with all their lighting effects."

So Westwood built a new technology based on one of gaming's timeless curios, voxels. Used to make units that could scale and rotate in *Command & Conquer: Tiberian Sun*, *Blade Runner* married them to another bleeding-edge invention. In the mid-'90s, a game that attempted 1,000 motion-captured sequences would be rightly considered a dangerous folly; *Blade Runner* features 20,000.

Each of its scenes is essentially a miniature movie, and sees visual and geometric data compressed and uncompressed on a frame-by-frame basis. Opening the door to a primitive yet effective form of dynamic lighting, this lets the game's voxel objects – the characters and flying Spinner cars – add light to an otherwise prerendered scene. It's a form of deferred rendering, effectively, introduced years before games like *Killzone 2* popularised it.

"But where the technology let us down was in the time and energy needed to process the motion-capture," says Castle. "We were capturing at 60 frames per second, and the characters in voxel space took up so much that we had to go through them, removing those frames by hand using keyframing." The original voxel objects weighed in at around seven megabytes in size while hardware at the time could manage only about 100K. Automatic optimisation would leave them unbearably blocky, leaving Westwood to do it by hand. Naturally, the studio didn't have time for 20,000 sequences, which is why some of the game's objects look plain bizarre. Castle sighs: "It just took too long."

Was dedicated hardware ever considered? "People ask me that," he replies. "'Why didn't you just use 3D?' Well, that's easy to say now we have full rendering pipelines and shaders, but back then you just didn't. You had a few vertex-shaded polygons and the texel mapping just wasn't accurate on a lot of the cards. Nowadays I'd do it all in 3D. But I gotta tell you, the time's coming when voxels and raytracing will come back into the fold because the rendering pipelines are so complex that we're flipping

Animoid Row represents the cream of the game's new locations, where angles suited to point'n'clicking demanded bespoke content


Westwood, headed up by Louis Castle (front, centre), was liquidated by EA in 2003. Some staff moved to EA LA, while others formed Petroglyph and Jet Set Games







Many of the images here depict *Blade Runner* as it's never been seen before, in its original rendered form before optimisation. They were discovered in a personal archive by 3D artist David Austin during research for this article

back to computational load, a pixel-by-pixel solution. All technology ebbs and flows."

Which is more than can be said for game design methodology. Beyond something like a *Police Quest* or the odd RPG/point-and-click hybrid – Microprose's *Bloodnet*, perhaps, or Esprit Software's *BAT* – few other games play anything like *Blade Runner*. Hopping between on-site and menu-driven detective work, making occasional use of the movie's Voight-Kampff and ESPER machines and even rarer use of the gun, it knows the darkest secret of adventure gaming – that if you want to be really interesting, sometimes you have to be really quite boring.

"Blade Runner creates a very specific emotional experience – not one of horror or action-based fear but one of terror," says Castle. "There's actually very little action in that film, but when it happens it's violent, explosive and deadly. I wanted to make a game where the uncertainty of what's going to happen makes you quiver with anticipation every time you click the mouse. Things could go horribly wrong but most of the time they don't; most of the time it's simple."

Indeed, much of your time as hero Ray McCoy is spent in point-and-click limbo, visiting and revisiting people and places, wondering which overlooked action will open the next chapter. Most of your shots are fired in a training room as part of a routine that includes trading clues with a police mainframe, travelling in lifts, feeding a dog, travelling in more lifts and occasionally getting some sleep. "You had to be doing something that was distracting you from the physical, so when the violence came you were shocked," says Castle, before describing how

Making the first and last suspects Replicants helped ground the story, but still couldn't save QA from a reported 2,500 playthroughs

he'd apply the same principle to Scott's other sci-fi classic, Alien: "Most of the time you'd be dealing with the problems of the Nostromo, how to fix it and who the android is. But when the alien appeared, by God you'd have to fight like a devil."

Who the androids are is, of course, the crux of a Blade Runner story, especially when looking in the mirror. Westwood didn't want to spend four CDs' worth of time and money on a game you only played once, so the problem became one of recycling uncertainty. How do you solve the investigation, expose the fugitives and read the script without ripping the game's heart out? Simple, thought Castle – you make a 'story simulator' instead, a script that even the writers can't predict. "You'd think I'd have learned by now," he laughs, "not to be seduced by these easy-to-express, difficult-to-execute ideas. A living, breathing city that adapts to what you do? That's very easily said."

In early prototypes, all of the Replicant identities were randomly assigned, but this proved baffling for playtesters. *Have you ever retired a human by mistake?* Yes, they answered, after bungling the investigation at the first opportunity. Making the first and last suspects – meathead chef Zuben and the majestic, psychotic Clovis – always be Replicants helped ground the game's story, but still couldn't save a valiant QA department from a reported 2,500 playthroughs. The game's script, penned by Bud Yorkin's son David and lead designer David Leary, had swollen from 80 to 500 pages.

Castle recalls how Yorkin's first draft, an attempted videogame script, just didn't work. Instead, he was asked to write a movie script for a hypothetical Blade Runner sequel. This gave Westwood a cast of characters so in keeping with the movie's bitterness that they're now considered canon by fans. There's animal counterfeiter Runciter, troubled teenager and potential Replicant Lucy, hotshot Blade Runner Crystal Steele, and a new band of escaped Replicants, some looking for revenge, others simply looking for a life.

"David [Yorkin] might have one line in his dialogue that read: 'The brownstones looked particularly out of place because they were







Future LA's catacombs conjure a grand illusion from just a tiny handful of sets. Another sleight of hand is how, as the game progresses, it becomes possible to travel between widely separated districts on foot

lost in the 1950s.' So we'd research all that stuff and build a set based on that one observation," recalls Castle. And where the locations were too close to warrant cutscene transitions, more were built to connect them. "We did a lot of location stuff in LA, on the sets where they'd done things like the Bradbury building. We included a lot more of that building than was seen in the actual film."

Blade Runner had, fittingly, become a colossal undertaking of its own. Castle admits: "It took longer than expected and cost more than we wanted, and there were poignant moments where we said: 'OK, can we reduce the scope?' But I'd say that sheer tenacity and a desire to do it right got us through those things. Before we even started we had beautiful work, and as the game came together looking just like it, people were so enamoured that we could have just kept going and gotten any amount of money. Time was our enemy; we just couldn't get to everything we wanted."

It was a familiar outcome sadly never followed by a 'final' or even 'director's' cut. A 'designer's' cut, yes, but that was just a menu option to trim the game's dialogue. There were "deep discussions" about a sequel, and the game's success – it outsold 1997's *The Curse Of Monkey Island* by three to one, claims Castle, shifting over a million copies – made it seem inevitable. "But even with that kind of volume, the mere fact it was four CDs made it a very expensive game. And the deal we had with the Blade Runner Partnership meant it was not terribly profitable. It didn't do as well as you might think."

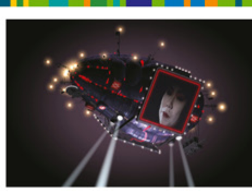
Looking simply at gross sales and ignoring the costs of making, much less publishing such an epic, the Blade Runner Partnership wanted an ever bigger slice of its successor. In the end, Castle himself pulled the plug. "It was untenable, too great a risk. We were under the impression they'd get someone else to do it, but I gather they couldn't find anyone to go along with the terms they thought were fair." Want proof? Ask Gearbox.

Only last year, the *Borderlands* creator described how it was offered the licence, calculated it would cost $35m to develop and that it would never make the money back. It would be a game, agrees Castle, to "challenge anybody's sense of a reasonable business rubric. You're not going to succeed unless you do it extraordinarily well, and that won't happen without an extraordinarily good team with an extraordinary amount of money. And then you have a partnership that demands a giant chunk because it's not their job to take risks. Put that in a recipe and bake it and you don't end up with cake."

Tragically, and despite the resurrections of games like *Beneath A Steel Sky* and *The Secret Of Monkey Island*, there won't even be a remake. To restore almost a terabyte of assets, whether for new prerendered backdrops or full realtime 3D, would itself cost tens of millions of dollars. What's worse, you'd have to find them to start with, which might well require a time machine. Stored on magnetic platters, most of *Blade Runner* vanished when Westwood was liquidated by EA in 2003. It's lost, as a mad Dutchman might say, like tears in rain.

Several aspects of the rendered *Blade Runner* universe would be a tricky prospect to recreate with today's realtime technologies





I WANT MORE LIFE

Originally released on four CDs during the Windows 95/98 era, *Blade Runner* languished in operating system exile as Vista and Windows 7 came along; 64bit users were lucky if it even installed. Then industrious fan David Millington decided enough was enough. His custom installer works with the latest Windows versions and installs the entire game to the hard drive, though some reading and elbow grease is required. That leaves the issue of a garbled screen on startup, which is even easier to fix. Just hit Alt+Tab or Alt+Enter to return to the desktop and then click the taskbar to return to a now-comprehensible version of the game's interface. Millington's guide and files can be found on his website (snipurl.com/1b0nv1).



REGION SPECIFIC:
LONDON, UK

With so many developers crammed on to such a small island, you'd think Britain would have a capital for them. But what constitutes such a thing? Some kind of nexus, presumably, a virtuous circle of business and talent that produces more and better games than you'd find anywhere else. A first choice for hungry young studios and even hungrier graduates. But is that the reality?

Historically, you could argue not. London might be the most connected city on the planet, ideal for conferences, expos and meetings, but would you actually set up shop there? Or would you sooner look to Leamington Spa, Dundee, Newcastle or Brighton, where thriving communities feed startups with lower baseline costs? Stay small, stay cheap and stay together aren't mottos commonly associated with life in the big city.

Times are changing, though. The more gaming comes to rely on talent from non-traditional backgrounds – web design, high-volume server management, economic models, performance capture, voice acting (the list goes on) – the greater London's pull. And as outsourcing becomes an option not just for the big boys but even small, remote studios of no fixed abode, the market for London's nomadic army of specialists grows.

Moreover, as the smart money continues to pile into social networking games, London's mix of venture capitalists, user-interface experts and web developers becomes a killer combination. Few know that better than Playfish, the award-winning startup which, in November last year, was acquired by EA in what could potentially amount to a $400m deal. Joining teachers and employers from all corners of the capital, not least the enduring SCEE, the studio helps us explore this exciting new terrain.







WORKING CAPITAL

London's buzzing game dev scene offers a wealth of diverse opportunities

A recurring theme in this issue's Region Specific is the difficulty Londoners find in feeling part of a community, much less enjoy the benefits of one. The cult of the individual is synonymous with the UK's capital, and not just thanks to the vapid social and corporate wannabes who infest the airwaves and magazine racks. And while it's true that you could live ten lifetimes here and find something new for every night out, you could also spend that time wondering how such a bustling place could be so alienating.

On the upside, though, the city's own individuality is proving a boon for videogame developers, creating a buzzing market for the jobs you don't often read about in these pages. Gaming is branching out, embracing the kinds of technologies, business models and skillsets for which London truly is the capital.

If you're an actor, for instance, or a vocal performer, sound designer or mo-cap director, you can do worse than hook up with Soho-based game specialist Side. Featured in **Edge** back in December 2009, the award-winning outsourcer has provided talent for games such as *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, *Fable III*, *The Witcher 2* and *Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow*. Its sister company Sidelines, meanwhile, has found similar success in the writing field, not just matching storytellers to projects but fostering budding talent.

Creative London claims that over 525,000 people work in the region's creative industries, making it the third-largest employment sector in the city





As the benefits of outsourcing become available to all ranks of development, with them comes the need to communicate. What it lacks in internal community, London more than makes up for in global connections. Hence emerging companies like Slide, a character design house that lives up to its claim of triple-A credentials, providing sculpts for games such as *Assassin's Creed II*. And it's not just Ubisoft's global staff who fly in and out of its doors, but a homegrown army of visual effects staff trained for the capital's movie industry.

Screen Digest predicts a doubling of outsourcing initiatives over the next few years, and while London's labour costs can make it less appealing than, say, China, its multilingual culture, managerial pedigree and multiplatform development background cannot be underestimated. And for tiny remote studios of no fixed abode, like *Polar Panic* developer Eiconic, the wealth and diversity of local talent is invaluable. Creative London claims that over 525,000 people work in the region's creative industries, making it the third-largest employment sector in the city.

None of which means, of course, that there isn't a rich heritage of classic game development thrown into the mix. Footie sim master Sports Interactive has prospered in the capital since its inception in 1994, its business depending on a worldwide network of 2,500 part-time researchers it liaises with constantly. Rocksteady went from showing promise with *Urban Chaos: Riot Response* to global superstardom with *Batman: Arkham Asylum*; Bromley-based Splash Damage is now a stablemate of idol id Software; Kuju became one of the few international studios to collaborate with Nintendo, later reinventing *The House Of The Dead* for Sega; Rockstar London gained instant notoriety with *Manhunt 2*.

And there's Sony Computer Entertainment Europe (SCEE), of course, whose largest internal studio is based in Soho. Responsible for brands like *SingStar*,







EyePet and PlayStation Home, it's also home to much of the R&D talent behind the company's hardware platforms, not to mention various tools.

Despite its apparent hiatus, it's also worth mentioning *The Getaway,* the less-than-stellar open-world crime series that nonetheless announced London's potency when it comes to Hollywood-style productions. With movie actors filling lead roles, an original music collaboration with Ninja Tune records and action aspiring to movies like The Long Good Friday, the series isn't just a credit to Team Soho's resources and collaborators, but also the enviable backdrop to both the game and its creation.

Commonly dubbed a melting pot of cultures, London's eclectic architecture needs little introduction, either. A cyclical economy, the Blitz and the conflicting planning programmes that followed have created a place that's less time capsule than time machine, as historic as it is futuristic. Home to some of the world's most respected galleries and biggest stages, it's hardly short of inspiration for virtual world builders, from texture artists to level or even sound designers. As if to embody the theme of cultural intermingling, it's also where FreeStyleGames' dedicated music studio creates the game's celebrated mashups.

"If you're a young, ambitious wannabe developer, why would you not want to leap into an exciting career in a city where the streets are paved with gold?" remarked Headstrong Games head **Bradley Crooks** to Develop last year. "Erm, rent?" is probably the most common response, closely followed by the cost of everything else.

Apartment rents have surged in the capital this year, the perennial flood of tenants still encountering a dearth of available properties. The latest indexes show a spike in rents over the past few months in particular, though prices vary spectacularly through the City's immense commuter belt. Particularly helpful

Some of the UK's biggest game dev communities are still within an hour of the capital, which makes them as accessible to it as local firms during the rush hour

in this regard are sites like commutefrom.com, which help you balance commute time and cost.

With such a fragmented community of small, agile developers hopping between boom markets such as mobile and social networks, a degree of caution is recommended to those for whom taking the plunge means life-changing risks. For years, London-based developer Morpheme got by seemingly on wits alone, surviving the fall of Argonaut by switching between various mobile and casual game commissions before landing on its feet with Eidos, which purchased the studio in 2007. It retired the company's name just a year later as part of its high-profile restructuring efforts, keeping some staff as others left to form developer Honeyslug, setting out to make "interesting, original little titles". Such are the stories that pepper the region's CVs.

For victims of redundancy, at least, there's solace in the fact that some of the UK's biggest game dev communities are still within an hour of the capital (or thereabouts), which you could argue makes them as accessible to it as local firms during the rush hour. Rebellion, Exient and animation specialists Audiomotion and NaturalMotion are just a few of Oxford's residents; Guildford hosts Criterion Games, parent company EA and Media Molecule; and Cambridge is home to the likes of Ninja Theory, Frontier and another of Sony's internal studios. 



THE LONDON ASSEMBLY

Having made a subterranean dash across London on the busy Circle line to get here, walking into Playfish's bright, spacious fourth-floor meeting room comes as something of a relief. There's little time to relax, however, as today's participants, Playfish CEO and co-founder **Kristian Segerstrale**, SCE London Studio senior director **Mike Haigh**, Gamesys chief operating officer **Lee Fenton**, Mind Candy CEO **Michael Acton Smith**, Beatnik Games managing director **Robin Lacey**, Slide director **Robin Deitch** and games technology lecturer at City University **Chris Child**, gather to discuss London's nomadic workforce, the difficulties of forming a community in such a large city, and why London's banks provide a rich source of staff for studios.

What benefits does London offer game developers?
Mike Haigh: It's a real melting pot of media – including music, art and so on – and, from Sony's point of view, getting that sort of experience from other places is absolutely essential.
Chris Child: Even more so now that web games are becoming so important. There's a rich history of web design companies in London that are contributing to it.
MH: And it's that melting pot of those experiences, as everything converges – music specifically, and art and the online side – as our products become these all-encompassing things.
CC: Where do Playfish get their talent from?
Kristian Segerstrale: You lot, mainly [laughs]. On the one hand, there's a big mix of game talent – that's really important in our industry. There's also a set of high-scalability engineering talent, which is literally banks and all sorts of places where there are these secret closet gamers. A lot of engineering students who went on to do something like consultancy for a couple of years and then figured out that's not for them – they want to get rid of the suit and do something more interesting.



Home to a vibrant game-making community, England's capital city attracts talent from around the world. We join seven of its players to discuss the pros and cons of working in the Big Smoke

CC: They come to us first, do an MSC and then go on to work for these places.
MH: We get people in who start off in banks, come to us and then go back to banking and then maybe even come back again! They see the door being opened because those kinds of opportunities are *so* local.
CC: We see that a lot, too. We do a game design course, but the best students get snapped up by Accenture and banks – they can offer a lot more money than games can. But other times, the students want to stick with it and go for the dream.
Robin Lacey: From an educational point of view, we found that, [of] the number of people applying for universities and colleges like Imperial, most of the people doing computer science and things like that end up wanting to do work experience placements in banks. We've got one guy who came and worked for us, but he was the only guy in his year who actually wanted to do game design. Everyone else just went straight into database stuff – made loads of money, most likely, but…
KS: I think, at least in our world, the most valuable folks are those people who are super-bright engineers and really want to go out and create a great product, but also who have an eye for business. When you run an online game, you have access to all the stats and you have to think about where the game should be going. You can rise up through the ranks really quickly if you're an artist or engineer or whatever, as long as you have a good head on your shoulders and you can figure out how to make a better product for tomorrow. But what I think is a shame is that the game industry right now gets a disproportionately small voice in the overall milk round. The city is still seen as such a glamorous place to work – why, I have no idea – but it's very difficult to outline the amount of opportunity, frankly even financial opportunity, that does exist in the game industry.
Robin Deich: Do you not think it needs to start earlier, though? I know when I was going through uni, the idea of making games was never suggested.

RL: I think a lot of people in our industry do just end up stumbling into games.
CC: I think that's changing – it's an enormous ambition of a lot of our students. But the undergraduates are 18 when they start and they have this idea that they want to make games and it's this fantastic thing. Then they realise they've learnt this really useful skill that can earn them loads of money.
Lee Fenton: We deal with very high transactional volume, especially on the data side, and certainly we find that we're winning back the bankers now, whereas two years ago we were certainly losing out.
CC: Do you have much AI in your games?
LF: There's a big piece on the data side. As for graphics, we'll look at things like Unity, but there's a lot of Flash and Java development. But we have to *act* like a bank, so we have the security of a bank, and we need to attract people for that too.
Michael Acton Smith: I think we should look even younger as well. Our games are aimed at seven- to 11-year-olds and we get sent *tons* of emails and specs for games that kids want to create and, again, I think that parents or even at school… they're not being told that it's a worthwhile career. Obviously, it's a long, long plan for us to be thinking about this because it's going to be years before they enter the workforce. So we decided to have an open day for kids that want to be game designers, that want to come in to the office and meet people and get a sense that this is a worthwhile career. Maybe it's something all of us could do more?





MH: Are those kids from London?
MAS: They're from all over the place, but we probably invite ones from the local area to come in.
MH: In London, there's a dilution, in that there are a lot of opportunities. But when it comes to games as an option in London, I think that the kids who are brought up here possibly have so many they can choose from, they don't necessarily see…
KS: Overall, I think the thing we don't do enough is sell culture, sell the dream. If you take a snapshot of any of our offices, and you take a snapshot of a bank, looking at average days, career progression and, most importantly, the quality of life and what you get done… we're not doing a good enough job of selling that.
MH: So banks are a problem for you?
KS: No, not at all. I'm using banks as a name for faceless companies.
MAS: They're a problem for us. We're finding it really tough to recruit against the banks for the back-end engineers, the web scale guys. It's *so* hard to get guys that are really good. Some we get who simply love games, but the salaries we're competing with…
KS: I don't think there's a skills gap in making games in the UK in terms of art and design. Where there's a real gap for us is, again, the back-end engineering. We'd like to see a greater focus on engineering talent across the board, and the building of centres of expertise here. People working at different companies, seeing how things are done differently and building up that skills base. We need more home-grown UK companies that do the really cutting-edge, high-scalability stuff. When one of our engineers meets one of your engineers in the pub, they can talk about how they've solved similar problems and that creates an environment where you have a thriving skills base.

London isn't known for its intimacy – is there much of a developer community here?
CC: That's one of the disadvantages of London – you say "meet down the pub" but there are so many pubs in London. It's not like there's one little place where all the developers go to meet up.
RL: We found that was very difficult when we first moved here. We set up a studio but I didn't have a clue if there were any other developers in the area. It took a year, and then we became friendly with Introversion and found out they were literally down the road from us. Then we kept finding people as they poked their heads out. The thing about London is that it's very big, and can be a quite lonely town.
CC: We suffer from the same problem that any community suffers from – finding each other.







"One of the disadvantages of London is that there are so many pubs. It's not like there's one little place where all the developers meet up"

to them at that point. We have a really strong professional liaisons department, who help people get placements in companies and we make contacts that way. But there isn't anything obvious like a get-together every six months.
LF: It depends where you think you can get good graduate talent as well. We talk to LSE [London School Of Economics] a lot about maths, because that side of our business is actually massively important when you create a gambling game. But sometimes on the development and coding side, you actually need people who can work in a team who are used to that process and you'd prefer to pick them up with a couple of years of experience under their belt. That's not to say I don't think you could fish nicely in graduate waters, but sometimes you need that level of experience – not a lot, but some.
CC: I don't really have a problem with our undergraduates going off, taking other jobs and then going to games companies, because a lot of the time, other companies actually have more developed training programs.
RD: I think being able to tie-in in some way while they're studying would be a great thing to do.

RL: Exactly. But there is a very active community, especially at our scale. You just have to find it.
MH: We've got The Mill over the road and NBC up the road, and we lose a lot of people to the film industry. I think that London is the European Hollywood, certainly in terms of Soho.
RL: In terms of being the financial centre, it's where everything's happening.
RD: That's a very good point. It's true that there might be sectors or skills that you require that don't have a very good London focus. But if you look at what SCE has done in terms of looking at what does work in London and using that to feed into EyeToy, *SingStar* and social gaming, you can see that you can make good with what is there.
RL: There's quite a few indie studios in London, and we have indie drinks reasonably regularly. People just turn up to the pub and everyone just gets drunk and talks about games. Small companies tend to go under a bit quicker than the large ones, so a lot of these guys finish a project and then set up a studio with other guys. There's a lot of borrowing of resources going on. Not as much as America, though – Austin is brilliant for that. I wish we had it more in the UK, especially in London.
MAS: Are there enclaves in London where most games companies bundle together? Because London's a pretty big space. We're in Battersea and our experience is that there's very little down there – it's not great for staff, there are only a few bars and restaurants, and one of our biggest issues has been trying to recruit people and convince them to move there. We're just about to move to Shoreditch and there seems to be an amazing group of tech startups there with that same mindset of growing quickly.
RD: There are definitely a lot of startups, indies and well-established companies there. Companies like AKQA and lots of web agencies are now coming together with the whole social gaming thing, so it definitely feels like that area is the hub. In terms of smaller companies, there is a lot of sharing and chatting and meeting up, but for bigger studios, I don't know…
MH: We have our own micro-climate anyway as we're quite a big group. Because we've employed a lot of people, we bring them in to the wider London community. It's an incestuous industry – as soon as you've bonded with somebody, that's it, they could be friends for life. And London is small enough to link back up – there's enough companies here that cross-fertilise, and inevitably you're going to get pockets of eclectic companies all mixed together. Particularly in Soho, you've got people who go off to join the film industry, but then they still meet up with their previous colleagues in a bar somewhere. We've got a bar at SCE, and you're all welcome to come.
CC: That's where the culture is, your bar? [Laughter.]

Is there much communication between developers in London and the universities?
CC: We have to push it. We go to games and careers fairs, and if the companies are there, we can talk

One of the problems we have is that we get a lot of CVs around July or August from people who've done game design degrees or related courses, and want to be part-designer, part-artist… And we want to acknowledge that enthusiasm – it's fantastic – but you aren't really going to get a job directly with that sort of thing. So, from my point of view, I'd love to have more dialogue with universities throughout these courses.
MH: One of the key things you can do is provide final-year project ideas, because it's free labour for you and great experience for the students. It's a fantastic way of linking up with us if you've got manageable bits that they can work on.
MH: We do do that, but it's not necessarily specific to London. I think it's a complex conversation in terms of education specifically from London. I think one of the benefits of London is that there is this pull, and actually we benefit from so many different universities and many different skills from all over the country.
RL: Do you do game design at City?
CC: It's all hard programming. We do have a game design module, though, which everyone absolutely loves.
MH: How many [of those students] go on to do games after that, though?
CC: About 50 per cent of the MSC course go on to a career, but the others keep it as a hobby.
KS: We are almost exclusively looking for, on the game-making side, creative coders who are really



"Because it is art, it's all about the talent. So in my mind it's a question of: can you afford not to be where the talent is?"

interested in the creative angle, not just the coding side. It's almost like they're two different breeds – coders who like to code, and coders who like to make stuff. I think that you can tell the difference. The course that you're describing will hopefully bring out those people.

CC: It's a well-known problem that for a while, a lot of universities have been going round trying to grab people whatever the cost – they're giving them Mickey Mouse game design courses and not doing the real hard work. We give them the hard work first, then their reward is to do some fun stuff. If they haven't got the technical skills, they're not going to get employed anywhere.

RL: It's interesting what you say about the different types of coders, because we literally have a dividing line in the office. We have the guys who do prototyping, and then we have the guys who are insanely hardcore. But it's really hard to find the guys who head up the prototyping team and just come up with an idea.

MH: They're the ones that, when you get them, they don't want to go to banks, despite the pool of money. That's who we look for – you can never have too many creative programmers.

Do the inflated real-estate costs in London cause any issues?

RL: As an indie, yeah. We only have ten people, and rent's quite a clout. We probably could go somewhere quieter with cheaper rent, but then we'd lose all our staff as everyone's a Londoner.

CS: One of the great things about our industry is, because it is art at the end of the day, it's all about the talent. If you're able to get the best talent, you can create a product that pays itself back. In that sense, it's more of a question in my mind of: can you afford not to be where the talent is?

MH: Because space is very costly, we use a lot of smaller developers outside of London to help augment our development. So it might be that we've got 20 core people within the studio and then they're complemented by maybe a team of 40 in Brighton. I think the thing about London is that you can reach out, and once you reach critical mass you can easily go and link on to other people around London and beyond.

RL: We were talking to our friends down in Guildford, and the studio that they've got for less than we're paying is quite amazing. But that comes part and parcel. We managed to get our office super-cheap because we haggled, but the building we're in is pretty basic. People don't seem to mind that, though – we haven't had anyone say that it isn't good enough. You can get space out there at a reasonable price, but obviously it's more expensive than elsewhere. We have one spare desk in the office that we'll use for work experience, etc. That's our capacity, and after that we'd have problems. For a small studio like us, being hit by an extra 50 per cent rent would be a real kicker. So I think you reach a limit on London office space.

MH: The heart of that is that London is the hub of the transport system, and it allows people to live outside of London. We're lucky in that respect.

RL: Yeah, most Londoners can get to you on a push bike, and people like that. I think we'd find it a lot harder to hire if we weren't based in central London – being so central goes down really well. We tried working with contractors remotely, but being such a small team, we had to have everything at the same point; we're not quite big enough to be outsourcing.

LF: I think the remote thing is something you do have to consider when coming to London because, like you said, there's a lot of international talent, a lot of









people coming in, a lot of people passing through – not for six months but for two or three years. We don't advertise for people external to London on the dev side, but we've probably got half a dozen now who actually sit outside, in places like Australia, the US – really far afield – but who spent a couple of years in the office with us.

How does the nomadic nature of the talent pool in the city affect the character of London's videogame industry?

MH: I think it's brilliant. I'm not normally for transient workforces, but in games, and in media generally, it brings in different cultures and highlights things you would never have seen before. Also, it keeps the people that are there permanently on their toes, because they're seeing new talent and thinking, 'Oh my god, I'd better be as good as him…'

KS: We have 26 nationalities working in our office here because, obviously, we're such an incredibly cool company to work for. [Laughter.] But if we weren't based in the heart of London, it would be a lot more difficult to recruit from abroad. Plus the industry is moving forward so quickly in terms of the amount of new platforms coming live, the amount of new business models, new ways of designing… Anybody who thinks they can wall in their workforce and win that way is burying their head in the sand.

RL: We have a policy that if anyone does want to leave, no one's ashamed and we just help them get a job somewhere else. Because everyone has their time, and you may stay there longer, but we don't get offended if people leave.

KS: The fun thing about the industry still being so small is that what comes around goes around, right? So the same people are working in different places at different times and it works to everybody's benefit in some ways because people have a reputation. Also, how you treat your people, not just the ones working for you right now, is incredibly important. We try to create a culture where nobody wants to go, but if they do want to go, then we celebrate their achievements and help them find another place. Because the day will come when somebody's going to use them as a reference, or they're going to be somewhere else looking to move and they might want to come back.

RL: You never want a guy sitting there for three months surfing the job websites, because then he's half a man sitting in your office. It's really nice that we can have such an open environment that people don't mind.

MH: But there's a really subtle and very significant point here, and that is that as we grow in the industry, we require more global success. Once upon a time it was fine to be successful in the UK with a particular title and, over time, [in] Europe as well. But nowadays a lot of titles require global success, and having people from various parts of the world coming in and contributing to those titles makes them more relevant from a global point of view. That's one of the significant things of being in London.

RD: The nomadic thing works fantastically. A couple of jobs ago, we had someone who had worked at Weta working on our stuff.

MH: The film industry works that way, bringing in freelancers, and the game industry, certainly from London Studio's point of view, does more of that now than we've ever done.

London has a reputation for both working and playing harder. Is that reflected in the studios here, or is the game industry such that the same intensity is present everywhere?

RD: Compared to the rest of the UK, I'd say that London has a higher age for getting married and having kids – for becoming more stable. And when you mix that with working in a creative industry, which is to some degree your hobby as well, that intensity comes naturally.

KS: Obviously there are crunch times when you have to push harder, but you try to compensate for that by partying harder. But I think, overall, all of us are in this for the long term and you've got to protect your creatives – the guys who are ultimately the rainmakers in this industry. If you try to squeeze them too hard you're not going to win in the long term. It's important to find that balance.

MH: I think the pressure is up in London. A lot of people come to London with the mindset that they're just travelling through and are going to work intensely. You see the same thing when people go to Asia. But in London they do that – work really, really hard with an ambition to move on, but actually *don't*. And I think what that does is tend to lift the bar for people's expectations.

RD: I think it's definitely true about the ceiling of achievement being a lot higher. I worked in Brighton for quite a few years, and there was a sense that the competition was within Brighton… But that raises massively when you end up in London and think, 'My god, it's a global thing'.

London's economy functions as its own microcosm. Are studios here buoyed by that, especially during times of recession?

KS: For those of us who are venture funded, that industry is driven by animal spirits and sometimes there is a ton of venture capital available and you can raise as much as you want, and other times it's more difficult. One of the interesting things is that games have actually become very fashionable as an investment target, whereas it was very difficult [for] developers to raise funds in this way for a long time. But overall I don't think there's much dependency, and, in fact, we get those guys from the banks when things aren't going well! [Laughter.]

MAS: There's a lot of very good, big VCs in London now, like Excel and Index. As Kristian says, they're *much* more receptive to gaming. They do prefer to make investments that are a short trip away for board meetings, rather than a long way out of London.

CC: As London developers, that's a very big thing for us, I guess – having all that available.

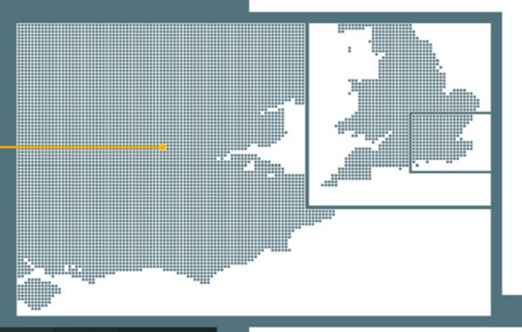
KS: People think of venture capital as money – obviously that's important, but in my mind it's more about building the team around the company that's going to help make it financially successful in addition to making a great product. I think that's one of the great things about some of these London VCs. For example, Index have tons of investments in online games and that knowledge of the sector across the board, as well as the sense of what's worked and what hasn't. I think we have a great thing going on in London right now.

PLAYFISH

A young London Studio built on a wealth of experience, Playfish is leading the way for online social gaming

playfish

- **NAME:** Playfish
- **LOCATION:** South Kensington
- **FOUNDED:** 2007
- **EMPLOYEES:** 100
- **URL:** www.playfish.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *Who Has The Biggest Brain?, Pet Society, Restaurant City, FIFA Superstars, Madden NFL Superstars*



South Kensington is more readily associated with fine dining, affluent shopping and the Natural History Museum than the game industry. But as we step into Playfish's refurbished top-floor studio, bedecked with characters from its various titles, it's clear that this developer of social games has had no trouble stamping its personality on at least one small corner of the royal district.

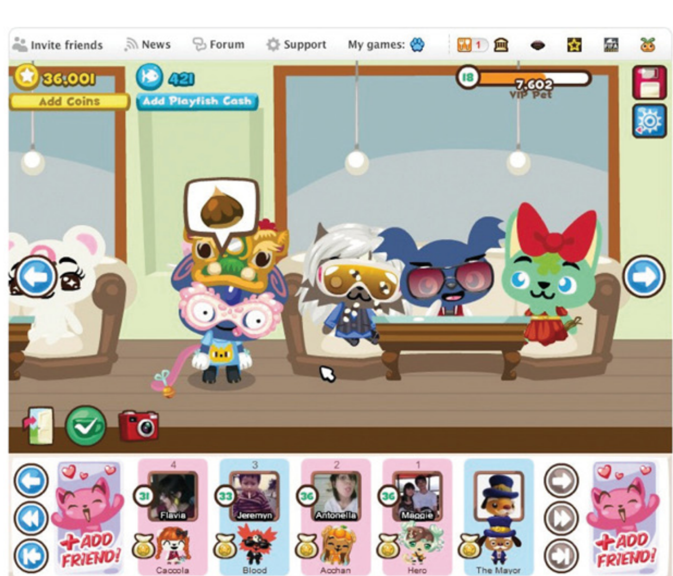
Founded by a group of mobile gaming veterans, Playfish has, in only three short years, become one of the biggest players in social gaming. The studio found early success with *Who Has The Biggest Brain?* along with its *Restaurant City* and *Pet Society* titles – games which, with their high production values, amassed vast audiences and raised the bar for Facebook play. It certainly impressed EA, as it snapped up Playfish last year for $275 million, placing a value on the industry for the first time. Following the acquisition, the studio has become a major part of EA's drive to expand its franchises into new territories, developing *FIFA Superstars* and, more recently, *Madden NFL Superstars* for Facebook.

But as we wander around the studio it's clear that, despite becoming part of the publishing giant, Playfish has lost none of its individuality. The aforementioned game characters on every wall are joined by colourful fish in a built-in aquarium, the light, airy space accented by splashes of bright colour. Photos of fans holding a Playfish logo in their favourite locations around

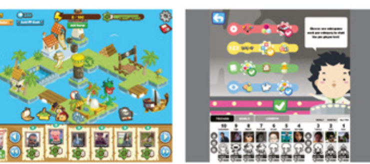


the world are pinned up around the place, and a large canteen is stocked with piles of fruit to help encourage employees to eat healthily. On a whiteboard, in among complicated diagrams of servers and business models, are written the words: "Any code distinguishable from magic is insufficiently advanced".

That sentence sums up Playfish perfectly. Under the exterior of the company whose business and engineering expertise have produced a raft of microtransaction-fuelled services beat the collective hearts of genuine, fun-loving gamers.







Playfish is certainly prolific: in addition to *Pet Society* (left), a game of pet adoption, clothes shopping and house decorating, and *Madden NFL Superstars* (top), which sees players coaching their own American football team and playing their team against those of friends, the company has 13 more games available on Facebook, including *Pirates Ahoy!* and *Who Has The Biggest Brain?* (above)









Interview:
Kristian Segerstrale

Vice president and general manager

Have you found it difficult to maintain Playfish's identity under EA's ownership?
We spent a lot of time beforehand talking to EA about culture; I'm a huge believer that culture creates games and that the culture of a studio is what makes it successful or not. I'd like to think that we've been very vigilant about it over the last year that we are still 100 per cent Playfish. Franchises like *FIFA* are very exciting to roll out over social networks but, at the same time, if you walk around our offices, you won't see too many EA logos.

What are the advantages of developing social games rather than traditional console games?
If you fail, you fail faster, but if you're successful you're able to string out that success longer. You don't need to launch a sequel every year. Our biggest game is still going strong two years later, and the development time for that was only five or six months. All the different categories of games on console have been quite well explored; now and then a game comes along that gives you goosebumps, but it's fairly infrequent. Social, on the other hand, still feels like it's in its infancy. There's so much room for innovation.

Do you think of yourself as a traditional developer?
Unlike some of the companies in this industry, we're very much a games company; we've loved games since we were kids and we're living the dream making them. There are over 200 million people playing games on Facebook at any given month – that's just a crazy statistic. A year and a half into our existence, we had two games bigger than *World Of Warcraft* in terms of monthly users, which makes you just sit there and think: 'This is totally amazing'. Even though we're part of the industry, and look up to the game creators who've been our heroes since we were kids, we see our frontier as figuring out how we can get more people to play – if you can make a game mean something to people in everyday life, because it becomes how they express themselves to friends, that is ultimately of a higher need than killing monsters.

Is there a danger that the free-to-play model is getting saturated?
I think the huge rush is a result of it having grown really quickly in lots of ways. It's very difficult to imagine that this world, where you have more than ten times as many people playing games on any given day than you ever had before on all consoles combined, could be worth less. That said, I do think that there's a new, different skillset required to be successful. Just like any revolution, creative destruction will happen, but I think that we're in the process of creating an enormous amount of value for the industry. In the short term we, and frankly our consumers, are still figuring it out, but in the long term there's an opportunity for the overall industry to both grow and become hugely relevant to a much broader audience than we've ever been able to reach before.


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gamesys

GAMESYS

As much as game development can be a gamble, here's one studio that takes the theme literally

- **NAME:** Gamesys
- **LOCATION:** Piccadilly
- **FOUNDED:** 2001
- **EMPLOYEES:** 210
- **URL:** www.gamesyscorporate.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *The Price Is Right, Strike It Lucky, Deal Or No Deal*

With a sprawling office slap bang in the middle of central London, behind windows that have seen the signage of Piccadilly Circus change from neon to pixels, Gamesys is no stranger to technological progress. That's more than can be said for many of its competitors – 'purveyors of games of chance' would be the polite description – which struggle to wrap myriad thirdparty games and brokers into something befitting a single URL.

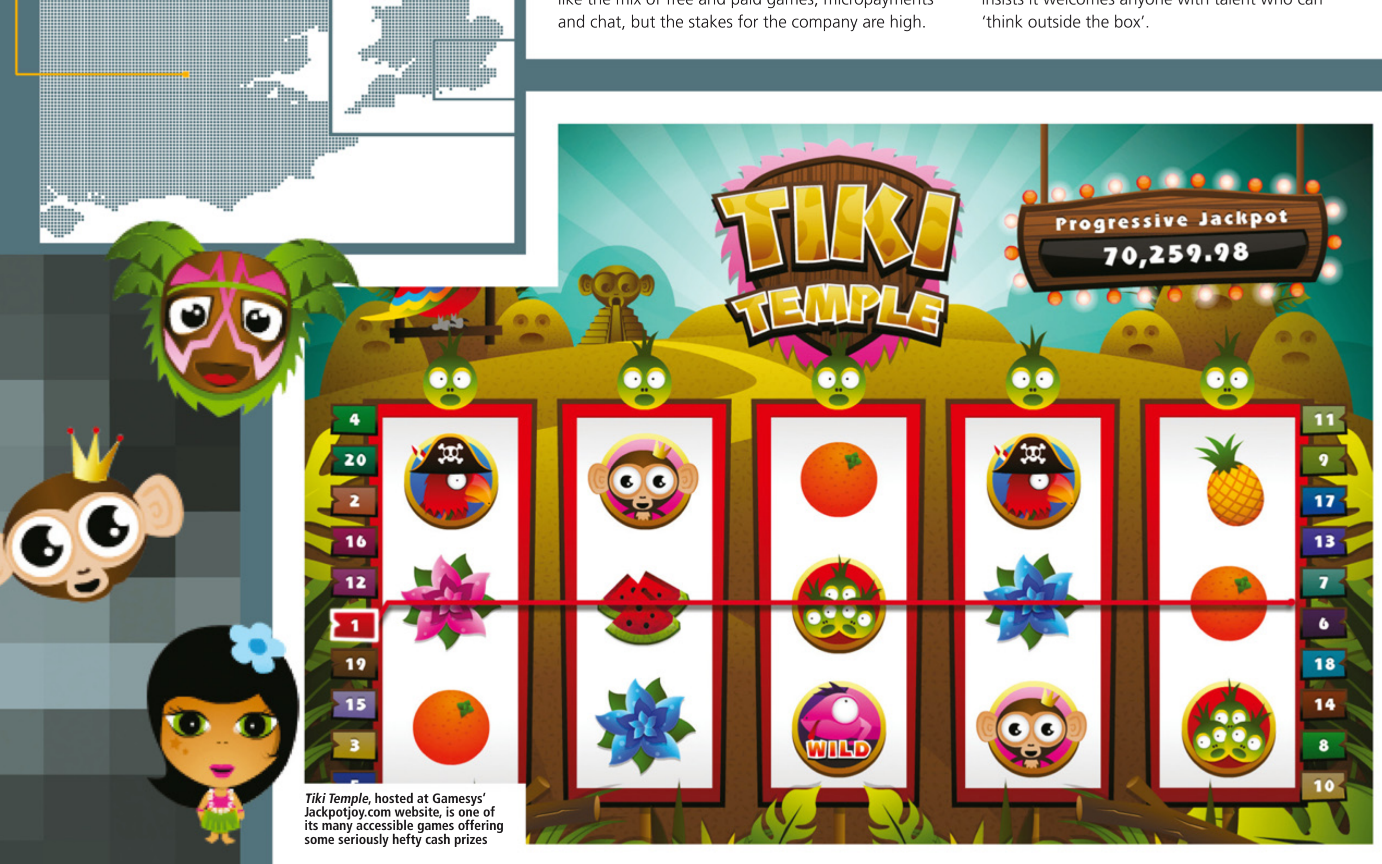
Gamesys makes betting games. Casino games, online roulette, video poker, virtual slot machines based on Hammer movies: they're all part of its website Jackpotjoy.com, though not always branded as such. Major clients include Woman's Own and News International.

It's a company at the outermost edge of 'gaming' as we know it, but its concerns and methods are familiar. Moreover, it's hard to ignore an outfit that talks about Facebook games and iPad which also, on a special day for some lucky punter, hands out the odd £1.9 million jackpot. Its customers like the mix of free and paid games, micropayments and chat, but the stakes for the company are high.

When it comes to adopting platforms and models, running head-first into technical (and sometimes legal) obstacles, it moves with the efficiency of a bedroom coder.

Few, in fact, make the Agile development philosophy sound so appropriate. Every few feet of its walls mention a different game, partnership, medium or system, the company owning the entire loop, from concept to launch and beyond via constant user feedback, of almost everything it makes. A lucrative partnership with PopCap, meanwhile, has added games like *Zuma* and *Bejeweled* to its portfolio, other licensors including Las Vegas casino giant Caesars Palace, TV game show Deal Or No Deal, the RSPCA and radio station Heart FM.

Currently embarking on a recruitment drive, Gamesys employs just the kind of atypical mix that sets the wider London development scene apart. Veterans of the banking sector, crossmedia marketing, web agencies, graphic design and game dev occupy neighbouring desks, though the company insists it welcomes anyone with talent who can 'think outside the box'.



Tiki Temple, hosted at Gamesys' Jackpotjoy.com website, is one of its many accessible games offering some seriously hefty cash prizes











Bejeweled (above) should be familiar to everyone, but the Gamesys version, *Hypercash*, comes with the twist of being played for money. Left: Gamesys' Piccadilly HQ



Chief operating officer

CTA: games and bingo

Head of game design

Interview:
Lee Fenton, Phill Graham & Joe Kennedy

Is it safe to say you're not just different from traditional videogames, but from traditional gambling games as well?
Lee Fenton: We're always very conscious of using phrases like 'higher form,' because it's not purely about the aesthetic but the gameplay that sits within it. For us that's incredibly important. There's obviously a certain psychology that goes with math models in gambling and that kind of thing, but we've always called ourselves an entertainment business, not a gambling business. Gambling just happens to be our business model.

If you think about the key thing that makes our games unique to other players in the field, we own everything, from the first brainstorming discussion to the delivery and customer service. We're not like an Ash Gaming, who develop and dish out to loads of different websites. We're not a Ladbrokes, who plug in games from 25 different providers and sit in a dev queue. We're not, in some ways, like an EA, who develop a game through a studio process, ship it in a box and don't have much to do with their customers going forward, though obviously that's changing a bit with Playfish. But we own the whole thing end to end, and have that feedback loop. Most of our competitors are either marketing-wrappers-as-websites, or games providers who don't actually deal with the customer.
Phill Graham: A lot of our competitors use backends and even frontends from three or four main people who do them – Virtue Fusion or someone like that. There's no differentiation, and they're never integrated very well because you have to transfer money into wallets, etc. There's no consistency in design.

What hurdles will you face as you enter markets like iPad?
LF: You've got technological hurdles like Flash on iPad, so what technology do we use to address that? You've got barriers like Apple not necessarily letting everyone into the App Store for gaming – they're not letting in games of chance – but obviously Betfair have overcome it [with the Betfair betting exchange app]. But we definitely see those as key technologies. Last week, in fact, we gave an iPad to every employee in the business. That's all about our people just getting used to that kind of thing. We think the ideas, the concepts and the opportunities can come from anyone, so it needs to get in the DNA of the business quickly.

What sort of employees will you be looking for as this type of gaming activity evolves?
PG: What we want to do is have the concept of studios that are self-empowered, almost like mini-companies. They'll own a game end to end and be responsible for delivering it, and they're a cross-functional team: designers, illustrators, Flash architects, QA engineers. And the whole idea is that they don't have any dependencies elsewhere in the company. These are high-volume sites so we need people with high-volume transactional experience – Java backends and stuff like that. And QA people that are used to testing that, but used to testing and playing games as well.

Is there any overlap between your audience and traditional gamers?
Joe Kennedy: One of the main things we've learned painfully is that you never take anything away from them. Only ever add stuff in. And if you do need to give something a refresh, it's got to be faithful to the original. Even the smilies, and especially the [bingo] dabbers. And colours – even if you change the shade of it. When we released the new bingo, there was a star or something missing and they went *ballistic*. We'd given them 50 new ones as well. They're very superstitious.



SCE LONDON STUDIO

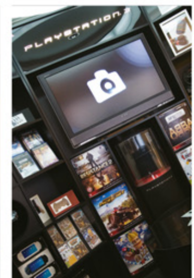
Sony's largest European studio is an eclectic mix of industry old hands and technological innovation





- **NAME:** SCE London Studio
- **LOCATION:** Soho
- **DATE FOUNDED:** 2001
- **EMPLOYEES:** 350
- **URL:** www.worldwidestudios.net/london
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *SingStar*, *EyePet*, PlayStation Home



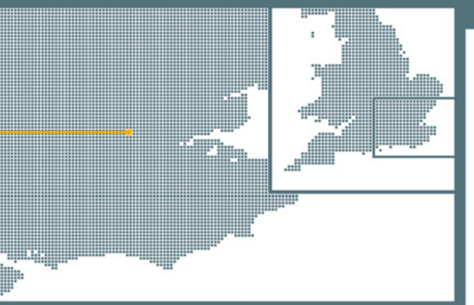


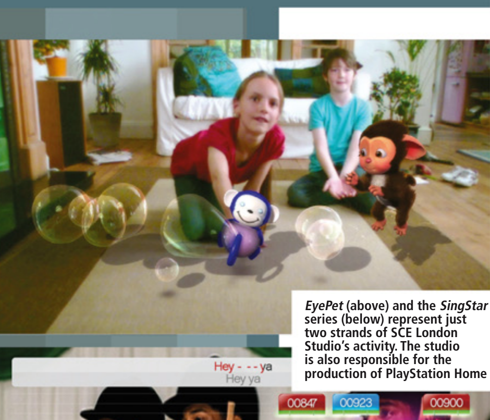


Senior director



Executive producer





EyePet (above) and the *SingStar* series (below) represent just two strands of SCE London Studio's activity. The studio is also responsible for the production of PlayStation Home

Interview: Mike Haigh & Seb Canniff

Formed in 2001 when Soho Studio and Psygnosis Camden amalgamated, SCE's largest European internal development division, London Studio, is built on a rich legacy. Located in bustling Soho, right next door to SCE Europe's headquarters, it's responsible for pioneering social gaming with *SingStar* and EyeToy. However, senior director **Mike Haigh** and executive producer **Seb Canniff** are keen to avoid any casual-game connotations.

How is the studio structured to encompass both its Psygnosis legacy and innovative social gaming facets?

Mike Haigh: Well, actually, the studio's comprised of six floors, and on each floor there's a little ecosystem, from the first floor, which is EyeToy and is all about that fun, R&D sort of technology, through to the sixth floor, which is international software development. I think each floor has its own character.

Is there any tension internally between perceived hardcore and social games?

MH: I think we need to clarify that there's a difference between casual gaming and social gaming – they're completely different ends of the spectrum. We don't do casual games, we do social games. But, yes, there was a separation between the people who wanted to do the hardcore games and the people that were happy to look into vision- and pitch-detection technology. That took place some years ago now. As far as I'm concerned, everyone within the studio knows exactly what it is they're trying to do. My remit's about trying to be as inclusive as possible and trying to make sure we're bringing in as many females to the audience as males – *SingStar*'s got a big proportion of women working on it.

Seb Canniff: In fact, one of the people who helped develop the original *SingStar* game was female.

It must be an advantage to have so many different perspectives under one roof.

SC: Yeah, it is. On a functional level we have a core engine and SDK that's used throughout all of our projects, so that's developed by the game technology group in the studio, and then projects take that and adapt it to their specific purposes. We've also got a central R&D team who're looking a little bit into the future and trying to work out what's next for camera-based gaming. Likewise, they'll share all of those ideas with the various groups, who'll see possibilities in bits of technology, so there's sharing in that way, as well as more casual sharing.

Does that make you sociable people?

MH: [Laughs] I like to think so. One of the benefits of our close proximity with the marketing group is that we get out a lot more than we used to. I think a lot of the success that we've had has been to do with that, having our ear to the ground through them.

SC: I think it is a really nice, friendly place to work. There are lots of teams and they are focusing on their product but everyone still knows and talks to each other. We do a lot of peer group reviews and show other teams what we're working on. The amazing staff bar and canteen also bring people together.

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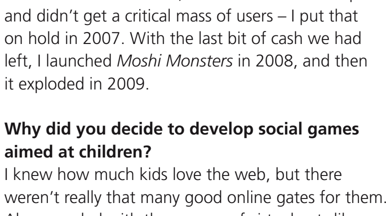
MIND CANDY



A small studio but one not lacking in ambition, Mind Candy is characterised by its willingness to take risks

- **NAME:** Mind Candy
- **LOCATION:** London
- **FOUNDED:** 2004
- **EMPLOYEES:** 40
- **URLS:** mindcandy.com moshimonsters.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *Moshi Monsters, Perplex City*





Moshi Monsters sees players adopt and care for a pet monster. Puzzle-solving leads to in-game currency that can be used to to buy items for the monster, and premium content can be bought

Interview: Michael Acton Smith

CEO

Though this small studio won awards for its initial exploration of alternative reality, Mind Candy has found more success in providing an online world for kids. But despite the diminutive stature of its target audience, the studio's ambitions are far from small. Founder and CEO **Michael Acton Smith** tells us why this is just the start.

How did Mindy Candy begin?

I ran a company called Firebox which sold toys and gadgets, but my real passion has always been videogames. A few years ago, it felt like a big opportunity was bubbling up at the intersection between games and the web – I wanted to create a company to splash around in that space. We developed *Perplex City*, an alternate reality game. We won a lot of awards, but it was far too complex and didn't get a critical mass of users – I put that on hold in 2007. With the last bit of cash we had left, I launched *Moshi Monsters* in 2008, and then it exploded in 2009.

Why did you decide to develop social games aimed at children?

I knew how much kids love the web, but there weren't really that many good online gates for them. Also, coupled with the success of virtual pets like Tamagotchi and Furby, then *Nintendogs* on the DS, I felt there was a big opportunity to build a new type of virtual pet that lives on the web. The key piece was adding a social layer to create a safe community for kids to connect to each other, chat, show off and share strategies.

Obviously the internet can be a dangerous place for children – why is it important to introduce them so early?

Well, I don't think the ages we're connecting with – eight, nine, ten – *is* too early. Kids absolutely love technology – if you see a kid with an iPhone or an iPad, it's completely natural. And computers, as well – from a very early age, children love using the web to find out information, so I think the internet is a wonderful resource for them. There's obviously a dark side – as there is with most things – and I think a lot of parents have realised that their children love the web and it's far better that they play in a walled garden where they know it's safe.

It's a very specialised area – how do you view yourself compared to other developers?

We're a games studio, but we also make toys and are involved in the licensing industry; there's a little bit of education – we're a technology startup. We're a little bit of a strange hybrid, so we have lots of connections in all these different fields. We're definitely not a traditional games publisher. *Moshi*'s not just generating revenue from subscription – we have toys; there's a magazine; there's a DS game coming out next year; an online TV show that we're doing; a multi-book deal with Penguin… We believe that if we get it right we can build one of the biggest entertainment properties of the digital age.

Obviously we're wildly ambitious and it's early days, but we think we're heading in the right direction.







CITY UNIVERSITY LONDON

With a focus on programming, City Uni has built a reputation among studios looking for fresh hires

CITY UNIVERSITY LONDON

- **NAME:** City University London
- **LOCATION:** Islington
- **FOUNDED:** 1966 (1894 as Northampton Institute)
- **STUDENTS:** 21,500
- **URL:** www.city.ac.uk
- **RELEVANT COURSES:** BSc (Hons) Computer Science with Games Technology; MSc (Hons) Computer Games Technology





Interview: Chris Child

Lecturer

The lot of a lecturer is not an easy one, especially when faced with the moving target of London's nebulous dev community and the game industry's emerging technologies and markets. **Chris Child** is a lecturer in computer game technology at City University London. Under increased scrutiny from developers, media and students over graduate employability, his is a course devoted to what the industry actually needs: not more designers and theories, but programmers and engineers whose first instincts are to build.



How low-level does your course get?
We try not to be too platform-specific. We could teach how to make games for PS3 and then, in three years' time, PS3 might not be the big thing. So we teach OpenGL ES as standard and that way our students learn skills that are transferrable across multiple games and platforms. We teach programming, unashamedly.

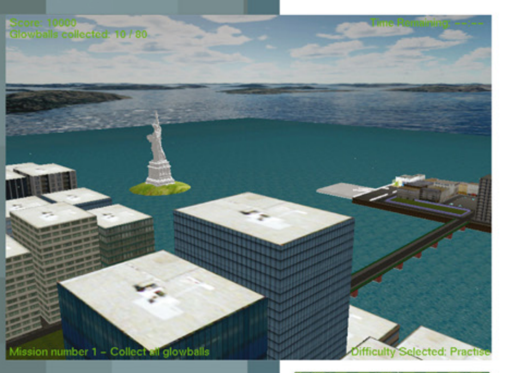
How often do you change the course content?
It's amazing. The game design MSc I developed two years ago has had to have half its content redesigned. We had a whole section on MMORPGs, and the next thing was Facebook games and Playfish being bought out. The core content of our courses are about building graphics engines, game engines and solid code – but the way that gets translated into real-world things is changing all the time.

Do you send people to game jams and the like?
We had a team go to the Xbox one last year, and a team in Dare To Be Digital.

Where do graduates go, professionally?
The games graduates are our most employable, and we're lucky if some of them refuse the big bucks and stay in the game industry. We're finding a lot of people want to make their own games straight out of university, and of course that's an option now. We had one guy who made a Microsoft Surface game, and that got spotted by a company on an open day and they commissioned a whole bunch to put in their foyers. And that's equally transferrable to iPad, and it's just a three-week project.

What middleware do you use?
We use Unreal for the MSc course – it's available for undergraduates as well but we don't teach it as such. We also have a whole range of game engines they can use for their third year projects. Maya and 3DS Max are now freely available to students, so they've got all these fantastic tools they can use.

Is there a dedicated case study component?
The third years all do a project, and the MScs do a dissertation. One of the big things we try to impress on people is that it's OK to do a game just because it's fun. It doesn't have to be anything more virtuous than that. What I want to get out of them is as many things they can show off as possible. For example, we've got a guy doing a squad tactics game – it's more of an API, actually. He's using influence maps and advanced flocking to do that. We've got another guy doing automatic generation of landscapes and cities, and another guy doing stereoscopic 3D in DirectX. We try not to push them, but find out what their dream is and try to follow it.

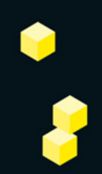




City's gaming courses aim to equip graduates with skills that have genuine application in the real world, teaching all types of graphics coding, from 2D to 3D

Codeshop

Tracking developments in development





Gathering of development

As multi-award-winning middleware Unity continues to grow apace, one of the men behind its success tells us that the need for focus is increasing



Nicholas Francis, CCO, Unity

It's one thing to drip-feed point releases to 100,000 grateful developers, quite another when it's a paid upgrade to a great many more. Because if, like Unity, your free users are as vital as your paying ones, deciding what to put in is just one side of the problem. The other is what to leave out.

In the case of the recently released Unity 3, differences between Unity (free) and Unity Pro (€1,100) include FMOD-powered audio filters, in-game video playback, Beast global illumination, realtime shadows, deferred rendering, render-to-texture effects and streaming of additional assets from outside the executable (DLC, for example) via Asset Bundles. The userbase, meanwhile, has reached 250,000 since its last appearance here in **E**213, just seven months ago.

"A bunch of us sit down and just debate [those differences] until we agree. Then we debate it again a week later because we've all changed our minds," laughs CCO **Nicholas Francis**. "We were originally game developers ourselves, so we've always wanted it so that you can bootstrap a game company or career on the free version. The base version should always be free so people can make games. But what are the base requirements for a game? That's a sliding scale. It's hard to figure out. And with the multiple platform support you can end up with this horrible feature mix, so we've tried to make that simpler."

Released mere hours after the platform received the Wall Street Journal's Technology Innovation Award for software, Unity 3 is big. The ability to export a project for web, iOS, Android, PC, Mac and the big three consoles is just a fraction of its feature set. "To qualify for a paid upgrade," explains Francis, "you have to do something *huge*. And all our iPhone stuff had been living in a separate code tree, so we had to merge all that back in. That was one and a half years of four guys just hacking away, doing weird optimisations and making it work, making it fast."

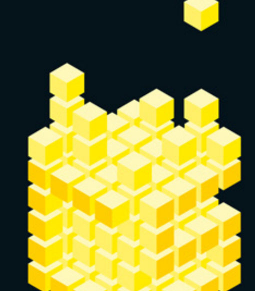


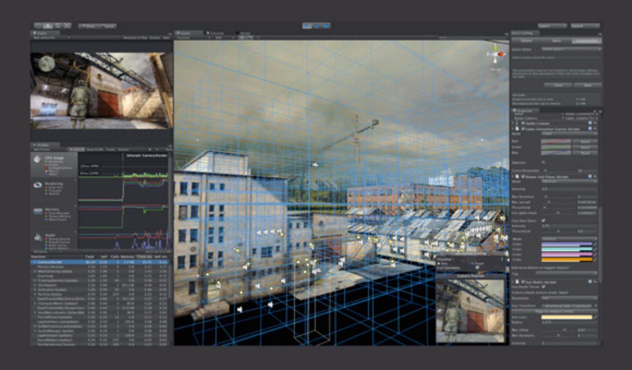
"We've always wanted it so that you can bootstrap a game company or career using the free version"



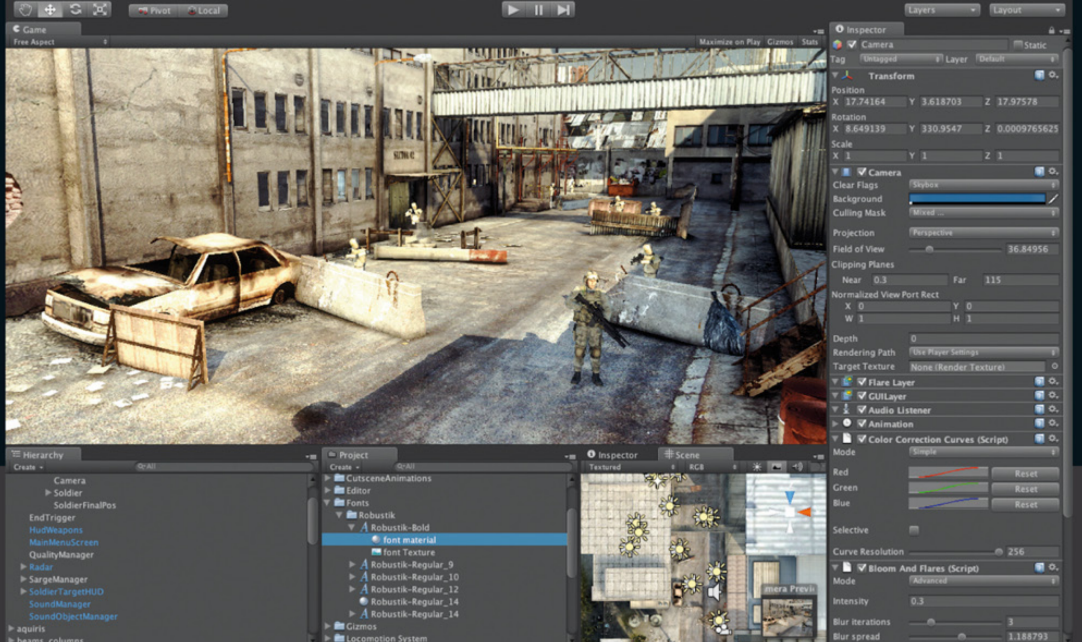
It's also made it a tool for the creation of big-league games with big-name technologies, from the aforementioned Beast and FMOD to Umbra occlusion culling. It's a tricky mix, though, for a product known primarily for its web output. Even its use of a traditional FPS for demo and marketing raised some eyebrows among its users.

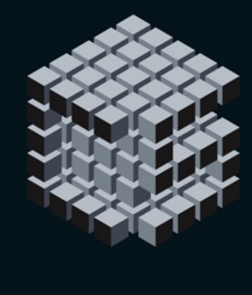
"I'm actually in front of one of our ancient banner ads at the moment, and that has an FPS where you're blowing up robots left, right and centre," says Francis. "So it's not like we've only ever done cuddly demos. But our reason for choosing that setting… we're now a full-featured, high-end game engine. We wanted to have open terrain that you could play around in when you first get started. And we needed someone running around that terrain, so why



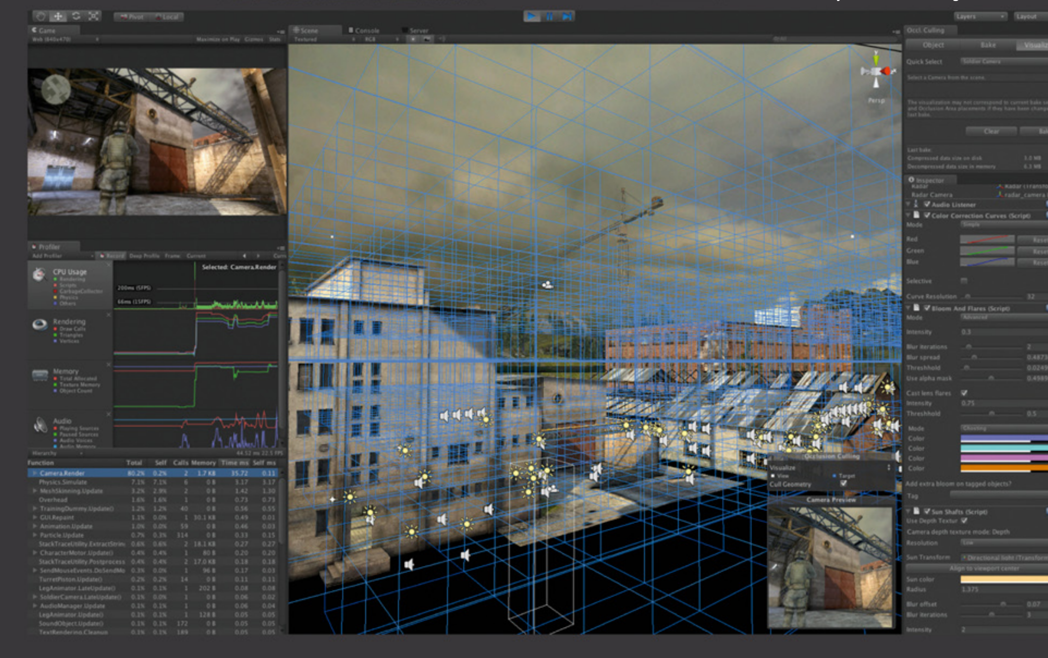


Unity's UI more closely resembles those of Adobe than Crytek, Epic or even 3DS Max creator Autodesk. This is no coincidence





The team takes great pride in the volume (no pun intended) of audio features new to Unity 3. Audio sources can be dropped into a scene through the vastly improved UI, with DSP effects and fall-off curves adjusted while listening



not make it a soldier? There's a bunch of people doing toon shader stuff, but as a showcase of what Unity can really do, we were like: 'OK, let's get some brown bumpmaps in there.'"

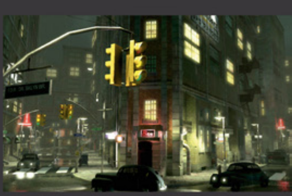
Deferred rendering, a technique that splits lighting up into small parts and recombines them when needed, has benefits for games featuring lots of lights, and the Unity team has quietly made an optimised rendering path for a single shadowcasting sun light and less important approximated lights. Some users, though, have questioned the team's commitment to traditional forward rendering in its wake. Has support really diminished?

"It has a bit," Francis admits. "Basically, we used to think we should be able to do everything in forward. Then we sat down and realised that doing it like that had enormous overhead; and while it might work in some cases, in others it just wouldn't. You're paying a huge price there. So we sanitised it: reduced code sizes and shader sizes and just simplified things a bit. Sure, you lose some features – and maybe we can get some of those back by engineering them a bit more properly than we did the first time round – but if you want to make high-performing games with lots of lights, you should be using deferred. And if your user can't do deferred then you're pretty much out of luck either way. Any time we remove or clean up something, someone's gonna get hit by it."

None of which has stopped users suggesting export support for even more formats, among them Windows Phone 7. It's a big ask. Like Zune, Phone 7 is an XNA project which strongly favours C#; Unity's runtime is written in C/C++. Will it simply never happen? "Those are strong words," says Francis.

"We've been speaking with the Microsoft guys, but my impression there is that right now they're just trying to ship. Saying, 'Yeah, you can also do C++' just creates a whole new layer of things that would delay their release. It just seems they don't have the bandwidth. In that way it's a bit like the iPhone: at first you only had browser apps, and then they began adding and growing. That's very important when you're doing technology, deciding what you want to be doing and giving it the resources to make sure that it happens."

It's a mindset that underpins much of Unity 3, from its division of upfront functionality and advanced APIs – "One of our users called Unity 'a toaster with a nuclear reactor'," notes Francis – to its heavily optimised C++ core, strategic use of threading and numerous assembler optimisations. It's why no one's in any hurry to embrace the C# of XNA and the Xbox Live Creators Club. And it's why the pay-per-feature model suggested by some users is strictly off the table. Aptly enough, Unity knows how to keep itself together.



The jump to deferred rendering was a brave one for an engine commonly associated – wrongly, perhaps – with 'cuddly' browser-based games


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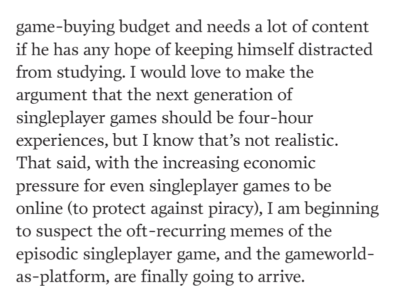
BY CLINT HOCKING

SOMETHING FROM (CLICK) NOTHING Convergence culture

Part six: Platform jumping

For the past five parts of this series I talked around the issue of singleplayer games and their place in the intramedia landscape I have been describing. I've looked at how social world-building games such as *Farmville* might seed content into singleplayer gameworlds. I've looked at how mobile apps might provide the backbone for a game economy whose principal consumers would be players in singleplayer worlds. I've looked at how organisation management games like *Mafia Wars* could provide a framework of content to sustain the ongoing life of a singleplayer game. But I've not really talked explicitly about the singleplayer game itself and what it might be like in this new intramedia model.

While I personally feel that modern triple-A singleplayer games are too long, the reality is that this is not the case for your typical 18- to 24-year-old who does not have an enormous game-buying budget and needs a lot of content if he has any hope of keeping himself distracted from studying. I would love to make the argument that the next generation of singleplayer games should be four-hour experiences, but I know that's not realistic. That said, with the increasing economic pressure for even singleplayer games to be online (to protect against piracy), I am beginning to suspect the oft-recurring memes of the episodic singleplayer game, and the gameworld-as-platform, are finally going to arrive.





> Why is Fallout 3 a 100-hour experience? I made time to finish it, but it came at a tremendous cost in terms of playing other games

In the case of the more systemic open-world games such as *Fallout*, *Borderlands*, *GTA* and others, we already see a trend toward serving players a lot of downloadable content. The reasons for this are obvious; the profit margins on DLC are relatively high for developers and publishers. This means that even if demand is low – say, only five to ten per cent of players purchase DLC after they finish the original game – the development costs of shipping what is effectively a script into an open world is a tiny fraction of what it costs to build that same content in parallel with the game (especially given that shipped games are stable).

I think the real question facing singleplayer games in the near future – particularly in the difficult economic climate of today – is how to reduce the cost of getting the gameworld into the hands of players, and increase the amount of high-profit-margin content we release post-launch into these stable, proven platforms. This only makes economic sense when you consider that currently only a tiny handful of game releases are profitable and all other game development is funded by a few hits.

Why is *Fallout* 3 a 100-hour experience? Admittedly, I made time to finish it, and I even downloaded some of the DLC. But it came at a tremendous cost in terms of lost opportunity to play other games. With the world of *Fallout* 3 sitting on my hard drive, and the ability of the developers to push more content into that world at any time, the real question is one of whether they have reduced their development costs by shipping me the game in five ten-dollar chunks over the course of the two months that it took me to play it.

When we start to imagine a game like *Fallout* as being more like a platform for serving content, the integration of some of the other concepts I previously discussed starts to make more sense. The small settlements that dot the landscape can easily be imagined as being served to the platform from a 'manage your wasteland settlement' social game. The shops in those settlements can easily be imagined as shops run by players from their mobile devices.

And without the game needing to become a full-blown persistent-world MMOG, it is trivial to imagine supporting drop-in co-op. Once we have a gameworld rendered perpetually 'fresh' because of the input of other players, it is also much easier to imagine that I would pay a reasonable price for the gameworld-as-platform, even if it only shipped with four hours of developer content. Done correctly, I even suspect the world could be given away for free, with features such as player-generated settlements and player-run shops being unlocked by microtransactions. High-quality, well-polished story content could then be sold at a premium – five to ten dollars for an episode running anywhere between three and six hours in length.

I think the appeal from a publisher and developer standpoint is obvious. This is a powerful way to maximise the efficiency of your staff and to generate higher-margin, lower-risk profit, more steadily. The argument I hear against trying it this way is that it is unproven, and conservative executives don't seem to want to be the first to risk their company on unproven business models.

Perhaps all the executives need is for players to demand it loudly enough – and to support it when it does finally arrive.

Clint Hocking is a creative director at LucasArts working on an unannounced project. He blogs at www.clicknothing.com



Illustration: Martin Davies



BY RANDY SMITH

HI, I'M RANDY Videogame design, etc

Does Heavy Rain fall?

Coming from my ideology, *Fahrenheit* (or *Indigo Prophecy*) couldn't have been more divisive. Pro: it covers interpersonal topics with well-drawn characters in relatable stories. Con: the design under the hood is a thorough rejection of player ownership, focusing instead on designer-authored branches à la Choose Your Own Adventure books. Considering that *Fahrenheit* was touted as a new paradigm in storytelling that would redefine gaming, it was easy to be cynical about this flimsy, uninsightful attempt to make fiction interactive.

There's that joke that every Microsoft product comes in three releases: version one which is as flawed as an alpha build, two which is actually pretty good, and three which is what you'd wanted all along. In that scheme, *Heavy Rain* is version two of *Fahrenheit*. The design and fiction have been tuned only by a matter of degrees, but they are important degrees, revealing ones that have shifted my opinion of this approach. Take those QTEs that form the interactive centre. In *Fahrenheit* they tended to feel like a sequence of pass/fail trials, especially laughable when they covered topics like basketball and punching, which games have pretty well solved by now. It made David Cage, the public face of Quantic Dream, seem frustrated, thinking: 'If only I knew how to make a real game, you'd push these buttons right now and this stuff would happen!' But in *Heavy Rain* the branch points are more numerous and come faster, achieving a critical fusion rate, blurring together into an unparseable whole. After the 'driving the wrong way down the highway' scene I couldn't remember every choice and action, but I felt like the outcome adequately corresponded to my fevered controller flailing. More impressive, Cage has succeeding in getting players to accept partial failure by tuning the QTEs so that mistakes lead naturally to a tenser, more engaging story, which feels like a reward. It's a constant forward slide you play for drama rather than mastery or exhaustive exploration.

Don't get me wrong, this isn't my style of design. It's more like *Heavy Rain* is emulating a videogame than being one. You're engaged with it like you might be a TV series where every episode ends in a cliffhanger, and it's sad the appeal isn't augmented with systemic interactions for the player to get lost in. But this time around, the complete, refined package does start to feel like a new paradigm. The presentation, characters and stories of Quantic Dream productions already grab my non-gamer friends more than anything else I play, and this approach to interaction strips away the need to be fluent in esoteric videogame language. You only have to train players once, then they have an instant level of comfort with any situation you put them in, from tense conversations to scrambling eggs. You could imagine this paradigm catching on and recruiting new gamers, lots of them. It could become a whole thing. It could be employed by creative minds outside the games industry. If a game like this came out every six months, would I remain excited to play them? If they were by Quentin Tarantino, Alfonso Cuarón, Cormac McCarthy or Haruki Murakami? Yes, I think I would.

> "The presentation, characters and stories of Quantic Dream's titles grab my non-gamer friends more than anything else I play"

But maybe not if they were always by David Cage. Although I rave about his stories, this is version two in more ways than one. Once again we have serial killers, childhood flashbacks, meteorological phenomena, and white panties in austere apartments. Once again the opening is gripping in its familiarity but eventually degrades, this time into a prancing circus of juvenile scenes as inappropriate as sexual assault at gunpoint and clichéd as a gumshoe handcuffed in a submerged car. There is no good way to preview what action your input will map on to, which matches the improvisational feel of the action sequences just fine but reduces what should be moments of deliberate choice to stumbling blindly through the story.

Which I suspect was intentional, to cover up *Heavy Rain*'s biggest failure to execute on the promise of its paradigm. I'd be excited to play these games to see what questions would be posed to me, what scenarios I'd be put in and how my reactions would be heard, forming a dialogue of sorts with the creator. What would I do if I woke up from a trance having just killed someone? I wanted to try a dozen solutions. But in *Heavy Rain* interactivity is used to provide a sense of involvement with a fixed narrative, not support real choice. Aggressive funnelling means every player sees largely the same material. You're asked if you want a drink, but if you say no you get one anyway. If you don't free yourself while the killer is distracted answering the door, the doorbell just rings again. Even whether or not you can bring yourself to murder someone is a decision with little impact. There is nothing about the paradigm that necessitates this, and it's a bummer that *Heavy Rain* wasn't brave enough to support lots of branching at the expensive of something else. But there is cause to be hopeful. I'm staying tuned for version three.

Randy Smith is co-owner of indie dev studio Tiger Style, whose first game, Spider, is available now for iOS devices







Illustration: Martin Davies

BY STEVEN POOLE

TRIGGER HAPPY Shoot first, ask questions later

Everyday manual handling

One of the crucial items of vocabulary in the science of inventing biscuits, or for describing the experience of drinking wine, is the lovely word 'mouthfeel'. (It sounds very modern, but the OED has a citation for it, albeit as two separate words, from as long ago as 1973.) Because we do not only look at, smell and scoff our biscuits (or quaff our wine, brought by Scandinavian serving wenches to accompany our cheese sandwiches) but we also perceive texture, viscosity, density, 'mouthcoating' and so on, and this is an integral part of the biscuit-muncher's or wine-guzzler's gestalt.

So it is too with videogames. As a recent history of the computer as designed object (Computer, by Paul Atkinson) reminded me, a videogame system is a physical object, and you interact with it – the dubious promises of Kinect aside – by manipulating the equipment directly with your hands. So an integral part of the videogame gestalt is the 'handfeel' of what is under our fingers.

> You can make the world's greatest gadget, but if it doesn't feel pleasant and interesting to hold, I probably won't use it

This is what struck me most about my first experience of PlayStation Move – which, by the way, is impossible to pronounce without prolonging the 'o' of Move until one sounds like a sleepy cow (just try it). *Start The Party* is diverting-enough silliness, and the first time you see the controller's tip transformed into a three-dimensionally-correct fly-swatter or fan onscreen is a truly impressive moment. But when the games were paused I kept looking back to the controller itself, rolling it around in my hand and caressing it. It has beautiful handfeel. It is reassuringly hefty, like a Shure SM58 stage microphone; the texture is not too glossy and not too matt; the buttons are free of irritating sponginess; even the seams and screws in the casing give a tactile impression of precision Teutonic engineering. It feels almost as though it could be a sonic screwdriver.

The controller, of course, actually looks like a microphone as well, which is a stroke of genius from Sony's designers, given that they were required to stick a big silly glowing ball on the end: OK, let's make the whole thing subliminally reminiscent of a piece of rockstar gear. This is possibly the cleverest thing about Move's positioning with respect to the Wii. The Wii's controller is modelled on a TV remote control, a familiar rectangular slab that everyone knows how to wield. Well, everyone knows how to wield a microphone too, especially in our karaoke era. And while a TV remote is something you point at a screen simply in order to choose what will be blasted in your face next, a microphone is a tool for mediating your own self-expression.

Handfeel has been an important factor in some of my most intense relationships with electronic objects, and maybe in yours too. One of the first videogame consoles I ever owned was a dedicated LED handheld shooter called *Galaxy Invader*, whose combination of massive knobbled red matt-plastic fire button and cool steel two-way joystick – the two thumbs thus feeling interestingly contrasting sensations – contributed importantly to its 'arcade-quality' aura.

When I recently caved in to imbecilic postmodernity and got a 'smartphone', meanwhile, I chose one (the interminably monikered Sony Ericsson Xperia X10 Mini Pro) partly for its delicious handfeel, the rubberised back complementing the perfectly edged glossy plastic of the front, the very slight metallic grain and tactile feedback of the physical keypad, and the inexhaustibly satisfying spring-loaded action of sliding it out and in. (And it fits in the palm. Since when did mobile phones acquire the right to be bigger than a cigarette packet? Why does everyone tolerate massive phones?)

I have, too, owned a cassette Walkman and a portable MiniDisc recorder whose handfeels I can still vividly conjure if I imagine turning them round in my fingers, like some tech-fetishist Gollum. Part of the reason I have never really loved an Xbox must be that I don't like the handfeel of Xbox controllers, with their roughish plastic and their horns at once too bulbous and too sharp. (What console had the best handfeel in history? The GBA SP.) You can make the world's greatest gadget, but if it doesn't feel pleasant and interesting to hold, I probably won't use it. Handfeel is key.

Do you think that 'handfeel' sounds salacious, in conceivable applications such as "Give me a quick handfeel, love"? No more than 'mouthfeel', I should say; and anyway I didn't invent it: there exists a completely serious academic paper from 1990 in the Journal of Sensory Studies entitled 'Development of Terminology to Describe the Handfeel Properties of Paper and Fabrics'. The word, I conclude, is not only necessary but also rather beautiful.

So, this festive season, don't merely savour the mouthfeel of your mulled booze and roasted birds, but pay attention to the panoply of subtle sensations that arise during your everyday manual handling of the world, electronic and otherwise. Happy handfeels, everyone.

Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life Of Videogames. Visit him online at stevenpoole.net



Illustration: Martin Davies





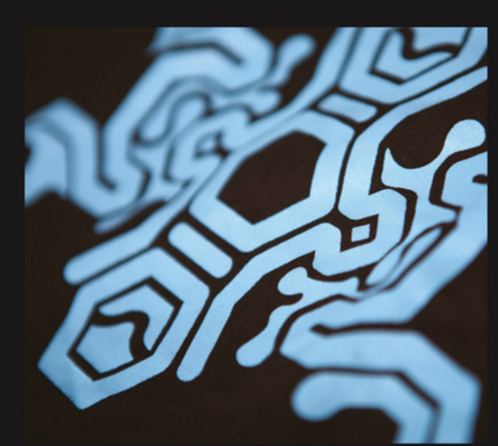
















Stylish designer clothing for gamers – inspired by the people, businesses and places of the gaming world.



BY N'GAI CROAL

PLAYING IN THE DARK ...because people refuse to see

People are always asking me if I know Tyler Durden

When I sit down to watch a movie, one of the most reliable predictors that I won't enjoy it is the use of voiceover narration. Even novelists, not working in a visual medium, are urged to 'show, not tell' when it comes to writing fiction, and with good reason. Hearing about events that have, are or will take place is far less interesting than seeing those events unfold before the viewer's eyes.

As used in the majority of Hollywood films and all too many indies, narration ends up as a lazy way to deliver exposition and/or illuminate a character's inner life. The filmmakers' intentions are usually good, but the experience of sitting through ill-considered narration is that the movie is talking at you, either robbing you of mysteries you would rather have uncovered for yourself or telling you things that you've already figured out.

This isn't to say that narration can't be an incredibly effective tool. In Taxi Driver, Robert De Niro's voiceover captures the sensibility of written journal entries while emphasising his character's isolation from the world around him. Ray Liotta's narration in Goodfellas has the detailed snap of 'as told to' non-fiction, and the limited perspective of a brash hoodlum. The varied soldiers' voices heard in The Thin Red Line steadily blur together, as if each were merely an aspect of a single organism, and Ed Norton's narration in Fight Club both heightens the film's satirical overtones while hiding its narrative twist in plain sight.

For much of the history of videogames, action and action adventure titles have tended towards interstitial storytelling – text, images and cutscenes that convey exposition between gameplay sequences rather than within them. One could see it as an oddity, reminiscent of the title cards in silent film. But it likely has more to do with game creators' entirely reasonable belief that it's hard for players to absorb and retain exposition during action sequences.

Over time, developers have become cleverer about tucking story elements into sections of gameplay that don't demand a player's full attention. Think of the conversations between characters sitting in a car as the player drives to their destination in *Grand Theft Auto IV*. The graffiti on the walls in *Portal* and *Left 4 Dead*. The ghostly flashbacks that play out before a gamer's eyes in *BioShock*. The banter between Nathan Drake and his companions as he climbs from point A to point B in *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves*. The projected memories in *Splinter Cell: Conviction*. So while a firefight isn't necessarily the best place to deliver exposition, moving from one place to another or exploring an environment that is devoid of enemies turn out to be excellent opportunities to do so.

> "It should have been obvious that voiceover narration could be a powerful and efficient tool for delivering exposition and characters"

Narration, on the other hand, still tends to be used sparingly during gameplay sequences in action and action adventure games. If I had to guess, I'd say it's because developers are more adept in conveying plot elements to players than they are the interior life of someone who, as often as not, is more avatar than character. But narration is more versatile than this. It can comment on the action: what the player has done, is doing or is about to do. And even though we don't see this much in action and action adventure games, we see it all the time in sports games, where analysts and colour commentators hold forth on soccer, hockey, basketball and American football.

This is what makes Supergiant Games' action-RPG *Bastion* so interesting. The game, which I saw and played for the first time at September's Penny Arcade Expo, uses a taciturn narrator – who sounds as though he's straight out of central casting for a western – to provide ongoing colour commentary on the player's actions. From "He gets up," "The Kid finds..." this or that weapon, *Bastion*'s ageing, gravel-voiced narrator contrasts wonderfully with the colourful worlds and somewhat childlike character designs that are reminiscent of the 16bit-era action-RPGs that inspired the team at Supergiant. And what could have easily been taken for mere homage feels more moody and mysterious, with a texture all its own.

In hindsight, it should have been obvious that voiceover narration during gameplay could be a powerful and efficient tool for delivering exposition and illuminating characters. But beyond that, as implemented in *Bastion*, it provides another layer of interactivity, creating a call-and-response relationship between the player's actions and the old man's narration. Players can choose to ignore it, or they can lean into it, testing and/or repeating certain actions to see how the narrator responds. And just as some players of *Left 4 Dead* will take a moment to read the graffiti in their vicinity, so too will certain players take the time to discover what words will emerge from the narrator's mouth.

As more developers get their hands – and ears – on *Bastion*, it will be interesting to see how many pick up the torch. Even if they don't go as far as Supergiant, it's nice to know that another arrow has been added to the game creator's quiver.

N'Gai Croal is a writer and videogame design consultant. You can follow him online at ncroal.tumblr.com



Illustration: Martin Davies



SONY
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Inbox



Issue 221

ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum

forums.next-gen.biz

Topic: Wipeout, supposedly in 3D

I have just bought a new slimline PS3 and a copy of *Wipeout HD Fury* to play on it (Blu-ray disc format). I have a Samsung C750 3D TV, and when setting up the PS3, it recognises that the TV is capable of playing 3D content. The problem is that the game won't play in 3D! As you can imagine, this is very frustrating, as the 3D feature of the PS3 was the motivation for buying the system. I have downloaded all possible system updates. Can anyone please tell me how I can set up the PS3 so that I can play this game in 3D? Cheers.

Wipedout

Have you put on your 3D glasses?

Hulka T

IIss iitt wwoorrkkiinngg nnooww??

Gideon Bible

Just what is Microsoft's plan when in comes to indie games? After all this talk about nurturing them, little has been done to improve the visibility of the Indie Games Channel to Xbox owners, or introduce better methods to sort the wheat from the chaff. Even if you know they exist, hunting them down through the various menus remains quite a labour.

If anything, the latest dashboard update has made things worse, sinking indie games into another anonymous subset of menus. Worse still, all the indie games on my Xbox now seem to idle for a whole minute on the disclaimer screen, before properly booting up. There were other glitches, too – most were clearly the result of high traffic as Xbox owners downloaded the dashboard update, but it's hard to see how this would affect indie games once they've been downloaded. The conspirator in me wonders if Microsoft has been under pressure to make their Indie Games service less attractive, for fear of it affecting prices on XBLA proper. To my mind, the Indie Games Channel, though brimming with cack, is also one of the best things about Xbox, both for its egalitarian conception and for the few shining gems it conceals. It would be a crime to see Microsoft let it go to waste.

James Pike

The Indie Games Channel, though brimming with cack, is also one of the best things about Xbox. It would be a crime to see Microsoft let it go to waste

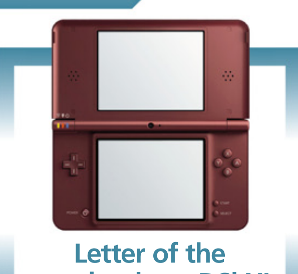
Hey, all of these shiny new family gamers enticed by Kinect into the Xbox 360 way of life have to be protected from the sometimes subversive nature of indie games somehow, right? Er, which is obviously not to say that we support conspiracy theories...

Recently, while my girlfriend and I were watching television, an advert for *Red Dead Redemption: Undead Nightmare* sparked up a debate. Being a zombie fan, I was immediately excited at the prospect of roaming the untamed west and avoiding the recently reanimated, whereas my partner (who watched me play through the entirety of the main game) saw it as a betrayal of the original narrative. While I don't wish to get bogged down in the well-worn ludology-vs-narratology debate, I found our difference of opinion on the DLC interesting; though I was entirely invested in the story, I saw only added-value bonus content, but my recent(ish) gaming convert girlfriend was far more precious about Marston and co's integrity.

Both perspectives are equally valid, of course, so I'll leave that particular thread there. However, it made me think about the nature of repurposing game worlds. Obviously, in an age of spiralling production costs, studios want to get the most out of their engines and it makes a lot of sense to share technology between titles. But *Red Dead: Undead* goes one step further by recasting its 'actors' and requiring very few additional assets. Perhaps if the game's setting wasn't so powerfully evocative already – the richly imagined turn of the century Wild West certainly doesn't need further embellishment – the clash wouldn't be so noticeable.

Disregarding the heady cocktail of cowboys and zombies, though, could this begin an industry trend for setting disparate narratives, or even game styles, in the same world? And in doing so, what is the cost to the original fiction? While I think *Undead* is a wonderfully playful use of *Red Dead*'s breathtaking vistas, I can't help but empathise with my partner's feelings that Marston's body might have been better left in the ground.

Paul Ridley



Letter of the month wins a DSi XL

An interesting conundrum (which bags you a shiny new DSi XL). Surely it has to be taken on a case-by-case basis. We reckon we could deal with Niko Bellic encountering alien life-forms, for example. Zombie Nazis somehow appearing in a *Halo* game, though? No.

Regarding the feature in issue 221 about downloadable games, it seems obvious to me that we're headed towards a future where physical discs will become rarities, and that future is going to arrive much more quickly than anyone is predicting.

At the moment, only the biggest developers are able to risk years of work and tens of millions of dollars on making games. That's fine if you're working with a known licence or a proven series, but right now, anything



slightly unorthodox that is still released through the traditional retail channels looks like it's just not worth the trouble. Take *Vanquish* – a brilliant game but one that reputedly failed to light up the charts. If I was Sega's management, I'd be patting myself on the back for keeping so many Sonic games in production.

Hard drives are only getting cheaper – my 500GB unit for my PS3 cost in the region of £50 – so it would make no sense for the next generation of consoles to include optical storage, especially when you consider that new hardware won't be appearing for a few years yet, thanks to the supposedly life-extending Move and Kinect.

Hard drives are only getting cheaper – my 500GB unit for my PS3 cost £50 – so it makes no sense for next-generation consoles to include optical storage

I buy my music as MP3s and watch movies through internet-based services, and I'm completely prepared to give up buying games on discs, too. This should be the last generation of consoles that uses disc drives. My main hope is that the removal of all of the crap that relates to retail will mean that innovation is given a chance.
Jonathan Carey

Sony, Microsoft and Nintendo aren't in the habit of shouting about the numbers involved in digital downloads – possibly so as not to scare bricks-and-mortar retail – but they're only going in one direction: up. Which company will be the one brave enough to announce that its next console will shun physical media? Which one is happiest to kiss goodbye to all of the additional revenue that's built into packaged goods? Place your bets.

Having read Mike Watson's letter in issue 220 I felt compelled to write and reassure him that gaming and being a parent can actually work very well together. I have three sons, aged 11, eight and six, and all three love gaming – and before the politically correct police start complaining, yes, they do play lots of sport, yes, they do have lots of friends, and no, they are not obese!

I'm very strict on what they play, in terms of age limits, etc. However, there are plenty of family-friendly games out there (thank you, Traveller's Tales), while even more grown-up games like *Halo* are fine in multiplayer. A particular highlight for me is fourplayer *Rock Band* – youngest son on drums, eldest singing and the middle one accompanying me on guitar. Also, watching through a sniper-scope as the youngest melee-attacked the eldest in two-vs-two multiplayer *Reach* was quite special, as it marked the moment where he could stand on his own two feet on the battlefield.

One drawback is I'm finding that, as my fingers age, my victory is no longer guaranteed. The eight-year-old regularly gives me a good kicking on *SFIV*, and my performances against the eldest at *FIFA* are now embarrassing. Last week I even powered up my Dreamcast for a fourplayer game of *Quake III*, thinking that the pace plus awkward pad controls would give me the advantage – sadly I was again beaten. But as a gamer of more than 30 years, actually I guess I'm more proud than annoyed when this happens!

Interestingly (given the content of Mike's letter), where gaming and parenting don't mix is in unskippable/unpausable cutscenes. The thought that they could walk in the room in the middle of a *Bayonetta* cutscene, for example, means that games like this are strictly for after their bedtime – please, please let us pause or skip them. A final plea to the game makers, given my own family circumstances, is to please continue making fourplayer splitscreen games. Yes, online gaming is fun, but playing with the kids sitting next to me gives me, I find, enjoyment on a completely different level and is, as I inferred above, just as competitive.

So don't worry, Mike – but do be prepared to lose regularly in a few years!
Ian Carlson

I read Mike Watson's letter in E220 with great interest and agreement. Mike, for what it's worth, being a parent will change things yet again for you, I'm afraid. When my daughter was newborn, there was no time for gaming at home for about two years – until I introduced her to Mario on the Wii. If she asks to see Mario, I have a bona fide excuse to power up the Wii and get some gaming in without feeling as though I'm neglecting her or that I'm going to get into trouble with the missus.

But even now, I find myself with little time or energy to play games at home – there's just too much to do between going to work and looking after a family. There should be, as standard, an option to pause any cutscene and the ability to quicksave in games because with a little one and a wife at home it is sometimes Sophie's choice whether to restart a level from

Continued



Paul Ridley asks: will *Red Dead Redemption: Undead Nightmare* blaze a trail for add-ons that run against our expectations?



Topic: How not to make Dreamcast games
Following *Sonic Adventure's* inability to be viewed in widescreen, despite being upgraded, and *Crazy Taxi's* lack of the original soundtrack, which was a key part of not only the experience but the attract screen that led you to sample that experience, I wonder how else could Sega maintain this 100% record. *Shenmue* with insta-travel? *Re-Volt* without online MP?
cockbeard

What? No Offspring in new *Crazy Taxi*? What did they replace it with?
Google

Billy Joel's Uptown Girl.
bogard

***Shenmue* with no sailors.**
g.man

***Jet Set Radio* rendered through the Unreal Engine.**
Tempy

***Seaman*, with Facebook updates for every mood change.**
Moot_Geeza

***Rez* with no fifth act.**
shindig

***Skies Of Arcadia* with no airships.**
hylian_elf

***Ecco The Sustainable Tuna*.**
pabloamigo

***Normal Beast*.**
regmcfly

Add a bonus minigame, 'Find your VMU'. It's really difficult.
FentonBailey

***Shenmue II* with an English dub. Oh wait...**
Kazuo

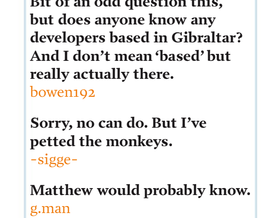
***Soul Calibration: How Steady Is Your Soul*. Exclusive to Wii, obviously.**
mangman

***Wino Crisis. Football Fury: Mark Of The Wolves*.**
Escape

the beginning or stop my daughter smearing chocolate over the walls.

Because of all the constraints that a family places on my favourite pastime, my wife kindly saved up to get me a PSP last Christmas. "Play it on the train on the way to work," she said, hoping this would solve my withdrawal symptoms. It was a great idea and I regularly put in one-and-a-half hours a day on the train journey to and from work on the PSP. But what annoys me is that there is such a paucity of decent, deep and playable titles on the PlayStation Portable. Why am I always hearing that handheld console gamers want gaming in bite-sized chunks, perfect for the ten-minute bus journey? I don't. I want something more, something gripping and addictive that I can really sink my teeth into. Do developers forget that you can snooze the PSP wherever you are and just pick up and continue playing where you left off? With this in mind, why does the game need to be broken up into small pieces? If anything, that's how I want my home console experience to be now – small, bite-sized chunks to fit in while baby is sleeping.

I'm sure I'm not the only adult who wants this, but the lack of really good titles that adults can enjoy on the PSP is a disgrace. I am not going to buy a kids' game just to fill the time. I want the power of the PSP put into gameplay instead of wow graphics, which it quite frankly rarely delivers. The PS3 is viewed by game makers as the adult choice and the PSP as the kids' choice. Why? Can you see the kind of hardware and functions Sony has put into this little machine? Is it really designed solely for kids? I really wish they would wake up and deliver enjoyable, playable and lengthy games on the PSP so that I can continue my passion on the train and not necessarily in my living room (surrounded by dolls and nappies).
Kevin Lumsden



Jason Mitchell lauds *Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow* for providing two weeks' worth of play, and believes that not enough modern games are made for those with free time to burn

It is sometimes Sophie's choice whether to restart a level from the beginning or stop my daughter smearing chocolate over the walls

One of Sony's problems is that Apple has done a great deal to shape the portable gaming landscape with its iOS devices, so lengthier, more complex games probably won't lead the agenda when PSP2 is introduced in 2011. We're sure to see more in the vein of *Ghost Of Sparta* (see p100), but they're likely to be standouts rather than staples.

Finally, on the topic of parenting, for the sake of balance we have to consider the other side of the coin, too…

It feels like every issue someone is writing in to say how they struggle to find time for games due to the demands of having a family. Tough! Children are demanding, requiring a lot of time and resources, and are – let's not forget – er… optional. Besides, games tend to have regular checkpoint autosaves and, often in the case of PC gaming, anytime quick and manual saving. So even if you insist on reproducing, you can still fit 30 minutes of *Dead Space* into your day. Handheld gaming is well worth investigating, too: just close the lid on a DS any time you need to sterilise a bottle, and get that JRPG fix that you might be currently missing. As for having to have the volume of a game spoilingly low so as not to wake up little Timmy and Sally, headphones are a must.

Not everyone in their late 20s and early 30s is, or wants to be, married with kids, and the flipside to the usual moan about games being too long is that I'm tired of spending £40 on a game that takes five hours to complete, especially as I'm not usually interested in the multiplayer portion. I have plenty of free time and want games to entertain me for more than a couple of sittings. *Castlevania: LOS* has just given me nearly two weeks of great gaming. More games like this, please.

If you have a wife/husband and babies, your hobbies – not just gaming – naturally have to move aside, replaced, presumably, by the joys of true love and parenthood. For the rest of us, stop dumbing down and shortening our games so that dad can finish them between nappy changes.
Jason Mitchell



Topic: Developers in Gibraltar

Bit of an odd question this, but does anyone know any developers based in Gibraltar? And I don't mean 'based' but really actually there.
bowen192

Sorry, no can do. But I've petted the monkeys.
-sigge-

Matthew would probably know.
g.man

Who is Matthew and why does his name have two 't's in it?
bowen192

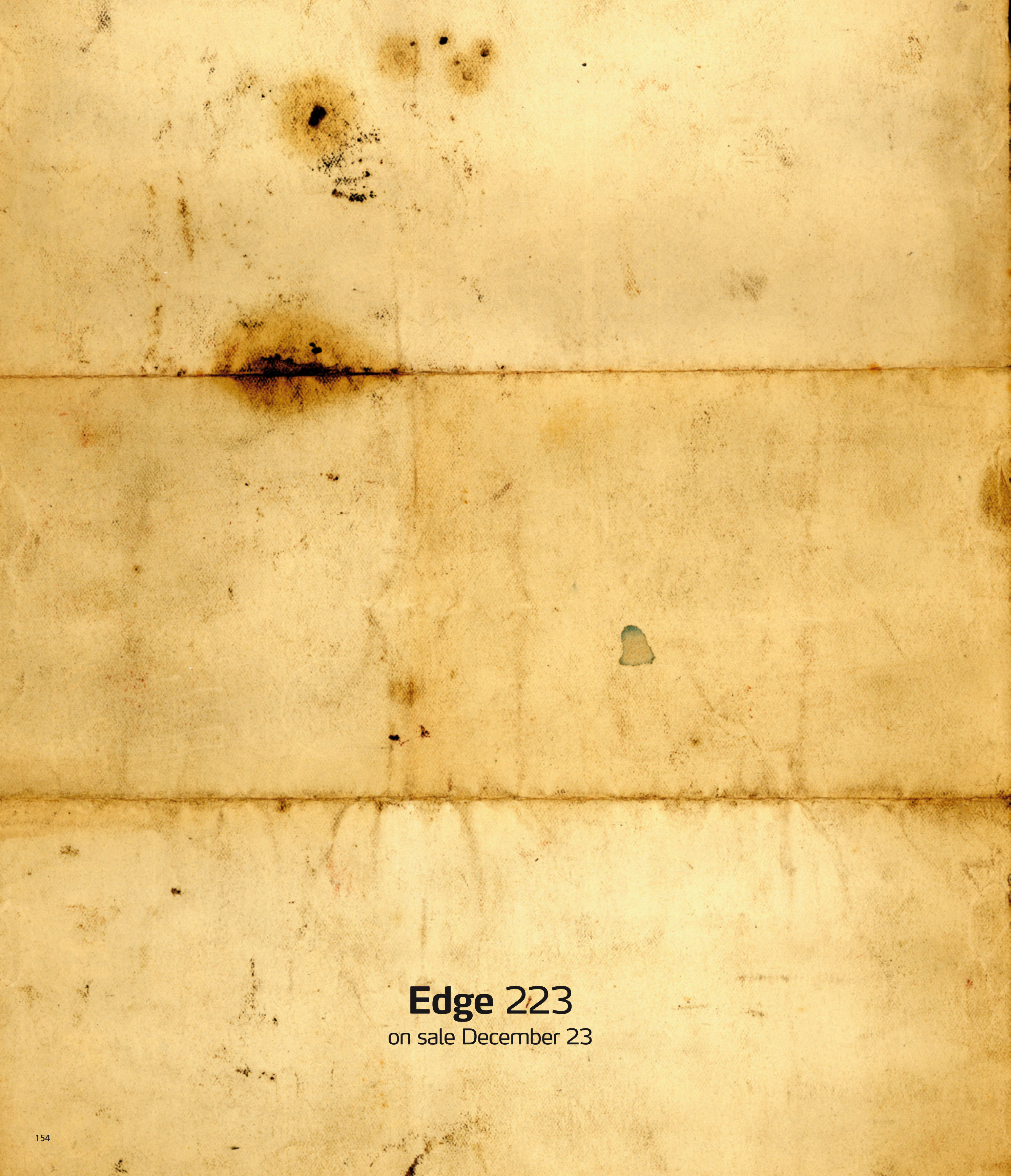
Lots of Matthew's have two 't's. Matthew's some boffin ensconced in Gibraltar, possibly with a time machine, who gives us updates from time to time on consoles that haven't been invented yet.
JMW

Ahh. Sorry, but I am part of an older generation where we spelt names in their simplest forms. This was before America and MTV were invented let alone names like KayC and Tirone.
bowen192

A much, much older generation it would seem: Matthew is spelt with two 't's in the King James version of the Bible, which was finished in 1611.
Yossarian

Thanks for the info, Yossarian. A word of caution, however. In future could you put 'spoiler**' or something in your header when talking about books or films.**
bowen192

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